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The Lost Art

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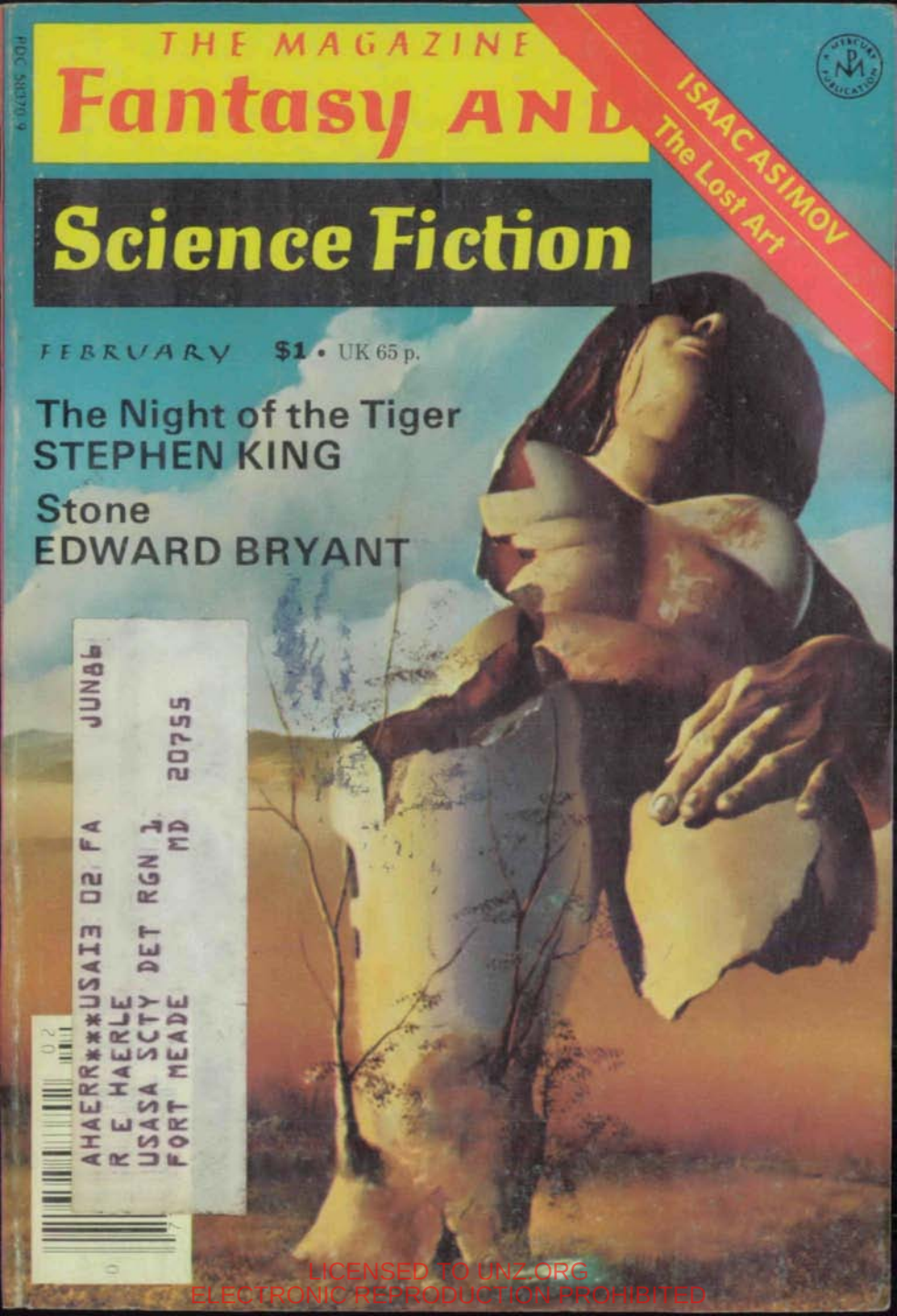
Stone
EDWARD BRYANT



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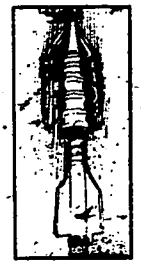
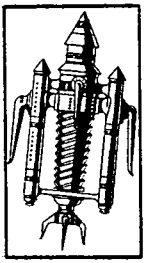
AN ADVENTURE TO THE STARS

ROCKETSHIP

From Leonardo da Vinci...



To Buck Rogers...



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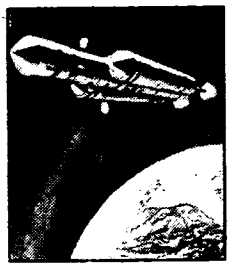

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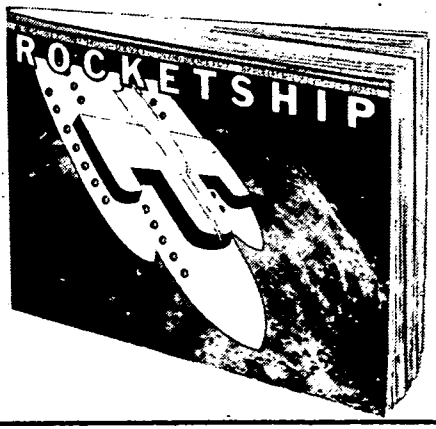

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FEBRUARY • 29th YEAR OF PUBLICATION

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Cover by Dario Campanile for "Stone"

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This story (generated by the unusual Dario Campanile cover) is about stim star Jain Snow; it is a terrifically intense extrapolation of the communion between performer and audience. Its author, Ed Bryant, has published a novel, Phoenix Without Ashes, *and more recently a collection of stories,* Cinnabar.

Stone

by EDWARD BRYANT

Up above the burning city, a woman wails the blues. How she cries out, how she moans. Flames fed by tears rake fingers across the sky.

It is an old, old song:

Fill me like the mountains
Fill me like the sea

Writhing in the heat, she stands where there is no support. The fire licks her body.

All of me

So finely drawn, and with the glitter of ice, the manipulating wires radiate outward. Taut bonds between her body and the flickering darkness, all wires lead to the intangible overshadowing figure behind her. Without expression, Atropos gazes down at the woman.

Face contorting, she looks into the hearts of a million fires and cries out.

All of me

— As Atropos raises the terrible, cold-shining blades of the Norn-shears and with only the barest hesitation cuts the wires. Limbs spread-eagled to the compass points, the woman plunges into the flames. She is instantly and utterly consumed.

The face of Atropos remains shrouded in shadows.

—

II

the poster

alpertron presents

IN CONCERT

JAIN SNOW

with

MOOG INDIGO

sixty-track stim by RobCal

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ROCKY MOUNTAIN CENTRAL ARENA - DENVER

III

My name is Robert Dennis Clary and I was born twenty-three years ago in Oil City, Pennsylvania, which is also where I was raised. I've got a degree in electrical engineering from MIT and some grad credit at Cal Tech in electronics. *"Not suitable, Mr. Clary," said the dean. "You lack the proper team spirit. Frankly speaking, you are selfish. And a cheat."*

My mother told me once she was sorry I wasn't handsome enough to get by without working. *Listen, Ma, I'm all right. There's nothing wrong with working the concert circuit.* I'm working damned hard now. I was never genius enough that I could have got a really good job with, say, Bell Futures or one of the big space firms. But I've got one marketable talent — what the interviewer called a peculiarly coordinative affinity for multiplex circuitry. *He looked a little stunned after I finished with the stim console. "Christ, kid, you really get into it, don't you?"*

That's what got me the job with Alpertron, Ltd., the big promotion and booking agency. I'm on the concert tour and work their stim board, me and my console over there on the side of the stage. It isn't that much different in principle from playing one of the instruments in the backup band, though it's a hell of a lot more complex than even Nagami's synthesizer. It all sounds simple enough: my console is the critical link between performer and audience. Just one glorified feedback transceiver: pick up the empathic load from Jain, pipe it into the audience, they react and add their own load, and I feed it all back to the star. And then around again as I use the sixty stim tracks, each with separate controls to balance and augment and intensify. It can get pretty hairy, which is why not just anyone can do the job. It helps that I seem to have a natural resistance to the side-band slopover radiation from the empathic transmissions. *"Ever think of teaching?" said the school voc counselor. "No," I said. "I want the action."*

And that's why I'm on the concert circuit with Jain Snow; as far as I'm concerned, the only real blues singer and stim star.

Jain Snow, my intermittent un-

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requited love. *Her voice is sha-green-rough; you hear it smooth until it tears you to shreds.*

She's older than I am, four, maybe five years; but she looks like she's in her middle teens. Jain's tall, with a tumbleweed bush of red hair; her face isn't so much pretty as it is intense. I've never known anyone who didn't want to make love to her. *"When you're a star," she said once, half drunk, "you're not hung up about taking the last cookie on the plate."*

That includes me, and sometimes she's let me come into her bed. But not often. *"You like it?" she said. I answered sleepily, "You're really good." "Not me," she said. "I mean being in a star's bed." I told her she was a bitch and she laughed.* Not often enough.

I know I don't dare force the issue; even if I did, there would still be Stella.

Stella Vanilla — I've never learned exactly what her real last name is — is Jain's bodyguard. Other stim stars have whole platoons of karate-trained killers for protection. Jain needs only Stella. *"Stella, pick me up a fifth? Yeah, Irish. Scotch if they don't."*

She's shorter than I am, tiny and dark with curly chestnut hair. She's also proficient in any martial art I can think of. And if all else fails, in her handbag she carries a .357 Colt Python with a four-inch barrel. When I first saw that bastard, I didn't believe she could even lift it.

But she can. I watched Stella outside Bradley Arena in LA when some overanxious bikers wanted to get a little to close to Jain. *"Back off, creeps." "So who's tellin' us?"* She had to hold the Python with both hands, but the muzzle didn't waver. Stella fired once; the slug tore the guts out of a parked Harley-Wankel. The bikers backed off very quickly.

Stella enfolds Jain in her protection like a raincape. It sometimes amuses Jain; I can see that. *Stell, a get Alpertron on the phone for me. Stella? Can you score a couple grams? Stella, check out the dudes in the hall. Stella* — It never stops.

When I first met her, I thought that Stella was the coldest person I'd ever encountered. *And in Des Moines I saw her crying alone in a darkened phone booth — Jain had awakened her and told her to take a walk for a couple hours while she screwed some rube she'd picked up in the hotel bar. I tapped on the glass; Stella ignored me.*

Stella, do you want her as much as I?

So there we are — a nice symbolic obtuse triangle. And yet — We're all just one happy show-biz family.

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IV

This is Alpertron, Ltd.'s, own chartered jet, flying at 37,000 feet above western Kansas. Stella and Jain are sitting across the aisle from me. It's a long flight and there's been a lull in the usually boisterous flight conversation. Jain flips through a current Neiman-Marcus catalogue; exclusive mailorder listings are her present passion.

I look up as she bursts into raucous laughter. "I'll be goddamned. Will you look at this?" She points at the open catalogue on her lap.

Hollis, Moog Indigo's color operator, is seated behind her. She leans forward and cranes her neck over Jain's shoulder. "Which?"

"That," she says. "The VTP."

"What's VTP?" says Stella.

Hollis says, "Video tape playback."

"Hey, everybody!" Jain raises her voice, cutting stridently through everyone else's conversations. "Get this. For a small fee, these folks'll put a video tape gadget in my tombstone. It's got everything — stereo sound and color. All I've got to do is go in before I die and cut the tape."

"Terrific!" Hollis says. "You could leave an album of greatest hits. You know, for posterity. Free concerts on the grass every Sunday."

"That's really sick," Stella says.

"Free, hell." Jain grins. "Anybody who wants to catch the show can put a dollar in the slot."

Stella stares disgustedly out the window.

Hollis says, "Do you want one of those units for your birthday?"

"Nope." Jain shakes her head. "I'm not going to need one."

"Never?"

"Well ... not for a long time." But I think her words sound unsure.

Then I only half listen as I look out from the plane across the scattered cloud banks and the Rockies looming to the west of us. Tomorrow night we play Denver. *"It's about as close to home as I'm gonna get," Jain had said in New Orleans when we found out Denver was booked.*

"A what?" Jain's voice is puzzled.

"A cenotaph," says Hollis.

"Shut up," Stella says. "Damn it."

V

We're in the Central Arena, the architectural pride of Denver District. This is the largest gathering place in all of Rocky Mountain, that heterogeneous, anachronistic strip-city clinging to the front ranges of the continental divide all the way from Billings down to the southern suburb of El Paso.

The dome stretches up beyond

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the range of the house lights. If it were rigid, there could never be a Rocky Mountain Central Arena. But it's made of a flexible plastic-variant and blowers funnel up heated air to keep it buoyant. We're on the inner skin of a giant balloon. When the arena's full, the body heat from the audience keeps the dome aloft, and the arena crew turns off the blowers.

I killed time earlier tonight reading the promo pamphlet on this place. As the designer says, the combination of arena and spectators turns the dome into one sustaining organism. At first I misread it as "orgasm."

I monitor crossflow conversations through plugs inserted in both ears as set-up people check out the lights, sound, color, and all the rest of the systems. Finally some nameless tech comes on circuit to give my stim console a run-through.

"Okay, Rob, I'm up in the booth above the east aisle. Give me just a tickle." *My nipples were sensitized to her tongue, rough as a cat's.*

I'm wired to a test set fully as powerful as the costume Jain'll wear later — just not as exotic. I slide a track control forward until it reaches the five-position on a scale calibrated to one hundred.

"Five?" the tech says.

"Right."

"Reading's dead-on. Give me a few more tracks."

I comply. *She kisses me with lips and tongue, working down across my belly.*

"A little higher, please."

I push the tracks to fifteen.

"You're really in a mood, Rob."

"So what do you want me to think?" I say.

"Jesus," says the tech. "You ought to be performing. The crowd would love it."

"They pay Jain. She's the star." *I tried to get on top; she wouldn't let me. A moment later it didn't matter.*

"Did you just push the board to thirty?" The tech's voice sounds strange.

"No. Did you read that?"

"Negative, but for a moment it felt like it." He pauses. "You're not allowing your emotional life to get in the way of your work, are you?"

"Screw off," I answer. "None of your business."

"No threats," says the tech. "Just a suggestion."

"Stick it."

"Okay, okay. She's a lovely girl, Rob. And like you say, she's the star."

"I know."

"Fine. Feed me another five tracks, Rob; broad spectrum this time."

I do so and the tech is satisfied with the results. "That ought to do it," he says. "I'll get back to you

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later." He breaks off the circuit. All checks are done; there's nothing now on the circuits but a background scratch like insects climbing over old newspapers. *She will not allow me to be exhausted for long.*

Noisily, the crowd is starting to file into the Arena.

I wait for the concert.

VI

There's never before been a stim star the magnitude of Jain Snow. Yet somehow the concert tonight fails. Somewhere the chemistry goes wrong. The faces out there are as always — yet somehow they are not *involved.* They care, but not enough.

I don't think the fault's in Jain. I detect no significant difference from other concerts. Her skin still tantalizes the audience as nakedly, only occasionally obscured by the cloudy metal mesh that transforms her entire body into a single antenna. I've been there when she's performed a hell of a lot better, maybe, but I've also seen her perform worse and still come off the stage happy.

It isn't Moog Indigo; they're laying down the sound and light patterns behind Jain as expertly as always.

Maybe it's me, but I don't think I'm handling the stim console badly. If I were, the nameless tech would be on my ass over the com circuit.

Jain goes into her final number. It does not work. The audience is enthusiastic and they want an encore, but that's just it: they shouldn't want one. They shouldn't *need* one.

She comes off the stage crying. I touch her arm as she walks past my console. Jain stops and rubs her eyes and asks me if I'll go back to the hotel with her.

VII

It seems like the first time I was in Jain Snow's bed. Jain keeps the room dark and says nothing as we go through the positions. Her breathing grows a little ragged; that is all. And yet she is more demanding of me than ever before.

When it's done, she holds me close and very tightly. Her rate of breathing slows and becomes regular. I wonder if she is asleep.

"Hey," I say.

"What?" She slurs the word sleepily.

"I'm sorry about tonight."

"... Not your fault."

"I love you very much."

She rolls to face me. "Huh?"

"I love you."

"No, babe. Don't say that."

"It's true," I say.

"Won't work."

"Doesn't matter," I say.

"It can't work."

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I know I don't have any right to feel this, but I'm pissed, and so I move away in the bed. "I don't care." *The first time: "Such a goddamned adolescent, Rob."*

After a while, she says, "Robbie, I'm cold," and so I move back to her and hold her and say nothing. I realize, rubbing against her hip, that I'm again hard; she doesn't object as I pour back into her all the frustration she unloaded in me earlier.

Neither of us sleeps much the rest of the night. Sometime before dawn I doze briefly and awaken from a nightmare. I am disoriented and can't remember the entirety of the dream, but I do remember hard wires and soft flows of electrons. My eyes suddenly focus and I see her face inches away from mine. Somehow she knows what I am thinking. "Whose turn is it?" she says. *The antenna.*

VIII

At least a thousand hired kids are there setting up chairs in the arena this morning, but it's still hard to feel I'm not alone. The dome is that big. Voices get lost here. Even thoughts echo.

"It's gonna be a hell of a concert tonight. I know it." Jain had said that and smiled at me when she came through here about ten. She'd swept down the center aisle in a flurry of feathers and shimmering red strips, leaving all the civilians stunned and quivering.

God only knows why she was up this early; over the last eight months, I've never seen her get up before noon on a concert day. That kind of sleep-in routine would kill me. I was out of bed by eight this morning, partly because I've got to get this console modified by showtime, and partly because I didn't feel like being in the star's bed when she woke up.

"The gate's going to be a lot bigger than last night," Jain had said. "Can you handle it?"

"Sure. Can you?"

Jain had flashed me another brilliant smile and left. And so I sit here substituting circuit chips.

A couple kids climb on stage and pull breakfasts out of their backpacks. "You ever read this?" says one, pulling a tattered paperback from his hip pocket. His friend shakes her head. "You?" He turns the book in my direction; I recognize the cover.

It was two, maybe three months ago in Memphis, in a studio just before rehearsal. Jain had been sitting and reading. She reads quite a lot, though the promotional people downplay it — Alpertron, Ltd., likes to suck the country-girl image for all it's worth.

"What's that?" Stella says.

"A book." Jain holds up the book so she can see.

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"I know that." Stella reads the title: *Receptacle.* Isn't that the —"

"Yeah," says Jain.

Everybody knows about *Receptacle* — the best seller of the year. It's all fact, about the guy who went to Prague to have a dozen artificial vaginas implanted all over his body. Nerve grafts, neural rerouting, the works. I'd seen him interviewed on some talk show where he'd worn a jumpsuit zipped to the neck.

"It's grotesque," Stella says.

Jain takes back the book and shrugs.

"Would you try something like this?"

"Maybe I'm way beyond it." *A receptacle works only one-way.*

Stella goes white and bites off whatever it is she was about to say.

"Oh, baby, I'm sorry." Jain smiles and looks fourteen again. Then she stands and gives Stella a quick hug. She glances over at me and winks, and my face starts to flush. *One-way.*

Now, months later, I remember it and my skin again goes warm. "Get out of here," I say to the kids. "I'm trying to concentrate." They look irritated, but they leave.

I'm done with the circuit chips. Now the easy stuff. I wryly note the male and female plugs I'm connecting. *Jain...*

The com circuit buzzes peremptorily and Jain's voice says, "Robbie? Can you meet me outside?"

I hesitate, then say, "Sure, I'm almost done with the board."

"I've got a car; we're going away."

"What?"

"Just for the afternoon."

"Listen, Jain —"

She says, "Hurry," and cuts off. *It's gonna be a hell of a concert.*

IX

Tonight's crowd strains even the capacity of the Rocky Mountain Central Arena. The gate people say there are more than nine hundred thousand people packed into the smoky recesses of the dome. It's not just hard to believe; it's scary. But computer ticket-totes don't lie.

I look out at the crowd and it's like staring at the Pacific after dark; the gray waves march out to the horizon until you can't tell one from the other. Here on the stage, the crowd-mutter even sounds like the sea, exactly as though I was on the beach trying to hear in an eighteen-foot surf. It all washes around me and I'm grateful for the twin ear pieces, reassured to hear the usual check-down lists on the in-house com circuit.

I notice that the blowers have cut off. It's earlier than usual, but obviously there's enough body heat to keep the dome buoyed aloft. I imagine the Central Arena drifting away like that floating city they want to make out of Venice, Cali-

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fornia. There is something appealing about the thought of this dome floating away like dandelion fluff. But now the massive air-conditioning units hum on and the fantasy dies.

The house lights momentarily dim and the crowd noise raises a few decibels. I realize I can't see features or faces or even separate bodies. There are simply too many people to comprehend. The crowd has fused into one huge tectonic slab of flesh.

"Rob, are you ready?" The tech's soft voice in my earpiece.

"Ready."

"It's a big gate tonight. Can you do it?"

Sixty overlay tracks and one com board between Jain and maybe a cool million horny, sweating spectators? "Sure," I say. "Easy." But momentarily I'm not sure and I realize how tightly I'm gripping the ends of the console. I consciously will my fingers to loosen.

"Okay," the tech says. "But if anyting goes wrong, cut it. Right? Damp it completely."

"Got it."

"Fine," he says. "About a minute, stand by. Ms. Snow wants to say hello."

"Hello, Robbie?"

"Yeah," I say. "Good luck."

Interference crackles and what she says is too soft to hear.

I tell her, "Repeat, please."

"Stone don't break. At least not easy." She cuts off the circuit.

I've got ten seconds to stare out at that vast crowd. Where, I wonder, did the arena logistics people scrape up almost a million in/out headbands? I know I'm hallucinating, but for just a moment I see the scarlet webwork of broadcast power reaching out from my console to the those million skulls. I don't know why; I find myself reaching for the shield that covers the emergency total cutoff. I stop my hand.

The house lights go all the way down; the only illumination comes from a thousand exit signs and the equipment lights. Then Moog Indigo troops onstage as the crowd begins to scream in anticipation. The group finds their instruments in the familiar darkness. The crowd is already going crazy.

Hollis strokes her color board and shoots concentric spheres of hard primaries expanding through the arena; Red, yellow, blue. Start with the basics. Red.

Nagami's synthesizer spews a volcanic flow of notes like burning magma.

And then Jain is there. Center stage.

"Damn it," says the tech in my ear. "Level's too low. Bring it up in back." I must have been dreaming. I am performing stupidly, like an amateur. Gently I bring up two stim balance slides.

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"— love you. Every single one of you."

The crowd roars back. The filling begins. I cut in four more low-level tracks.

"— ready. How about you?"

They're ready. I cut in another dozen tracks, then mute two. Things are building just a little too fast. The fine mesh around Jain's body seems to glitter with more than reflected light. Her skin already gleams with moisture.

"— get started easy. And then things'll get hard. Yeah?"

"YEAH!" from thousands of throats simultaneously.

I see her stagger slightly. I don't think I am feeding her too much too fast, but mute another pair of tracks anyway. Moog Indigo takes their cue and begins to play. Hollis gives the dome the smoky pallor of slow-burning leaves. Then Jain Snow sings.

And I fill her with them. And give her back to them.

space and time
measured in my heart

X

In the afternoon:

Jain gestures in an expansive circle. "This is where I grew up."

The mountains awe me. "Right here?"

She shakes her head. "It was a lot like this. My pa ran sheep. Maybe a hundred miles north."

"But in the mountains?"

"Yeah. Really isolated. My pa convinced himself he was one of the original settlers. He was actually a laid-off aerospace engineer out of Seattle."

The wind flays us for a moment; Jain's hair whips and she shakes it back from her eyes. I pull her into the shelter of my arms, wrapping my coat around us both. "Do you want to go back down to the car?"

"Hell, no," she says. "A mountain zephyr can't scare me off."

I'm not used to this much open space; it scares me a little, though I'm not going to admit that to Jain. We're above timberline, and the mountainside is too stark for my taste. I suddenly miss the rounded, wooded hills of Pennsylvania. Jain surveys the rocky fields rubbed raw by wind and snow, and I have a quick feeling she's scared too. "Something wrong?"

"Nope. Just remembering."

"What's it like on a ranch?"

"Okay, if you don't like people," she says slowly, obviously recalling details. "My pa didn't."

"No neighbors?"

"Not a one in twenty miles."

"Brothers?" I say. "Sisters?"

She shakes her head. "Just my pa." I guess I look curious because she looks away and adds, "My mother died of tetanus right after I was born. It was a freak thing."

I try to change the subject.

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"Your father didn't come down to the first concert, did he? Is he coming tonight?"

"No way," she says. "He didn't and he won't. He doesn't like what I do." I can't think of anything to say now. After a while Jain rescues me. "It isn't your hassle, and it isn't mine anymore."

Something perverse doesn't let me drop it now. "So you grew up alone."

"You noticed," she says softly. "You've got a hell of a way with understatement."

I persist."Then I don't understand why you still come up here. You must hate this."

"Ever see a claustrophobe deliberately walk into a closet and shut the door? If I don't fight it this way —" Her fingers dig into my arms. Her face is fierce. "This has got to be better than what I do on stage." She swings away from me. "Shit!" she says. "Damn it all to hell." She stands immovable, staring down the mountain for several minutes. When she turns back toward me, her eyes are softer and there's a fey tone in her voice. "If I die —" She laughs. "When I die. I want my ashes here."

"Ashes?" I say, unsure how to respond. *Humor her.* "Sure."

"You." She points at me. "Here." She indicates the rock face. The words are simple commands given to a child.

"Me." I manage a weak smile.

Her laugh is easy and unstrained now. "Kid games. Did you do the usual things when you were a kid, babe?"

"Most of them." *I hardly ever won, but then I liked to play games with outrageous risks.*

"Hammer, rock and scissors?"

"Sure, when I was really young." I repeat by long-remembered rote: "Rocks breaks scissors, scissors cut paper, paper covers rock."

"Okay," she says. "Let's play." I must look doubtful. "Rob," she says warningly.

"Okay." I hold out my right hand.

Jain says, "One, two, three." On "three," we each bring up our right hand. Hers is a clenched fist: stone. My first two fingers form the snipping blades of a pair of scissors. "I win!" she crows, delighted.

"What do you win?"

"You. Just for a little while." She pulls my hands close and lays them on her body.

"Right here on the mountain?" I say.

"I'm from pioneer stock. But you —" She shrugs. "Too delicate?"

I laugh and pull her close.

"Just —" She hesitates. "Not like the other times? Don't take this seriously, okay?"

In my want I forget the other

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occasions. "Okay."

Each of us adds to the other's pleasure, and it's better than the other times. But even when she comes, she stares through me, and I wonder whose face she's seeing — no, not even that: how many faces she's seeing. *Babe, no man can fill me like* they *do.*

And then I come also and — briefly — it doesn't matter.

My long coat is wrapped around the two of us, and we watch each other inches apart. "So much passion, Rob ... It seems to build."

I remember the stricture and say, "You know why."

"You really like me so much?" *The little-girl persona.*

"I really do."

"What would you do for me, if I asked you?"

"Anything."

"Would you kill for me?"

I say, "Sure."

"Really?"

"Of course." I smile. I know how to play.

"This is no game."

My face must betray my confusion. I don't know how I should react.

Her expression mercurially alters to sadness. "You're scissors, Robbie. All shiny cold metal. How can you ever hope to cut stone?"

Would I want to?

XI

Things get worse.

Is it simply that I'm screwing up on my own hook, or is it because we're exploring a place no performance has ever been? I don't have time to worry about it; I play the console like it was the keyboard on Nagami's synthesizer.

Take it
When you can get it
Where you can get it

Jain sways and the crowd sways; she thrusts and the crowd thrusts. It is one gigantic act. It is as though a temblor shakes the Front Range.

Insect chittering in my earpiece: "What the hell's going on, Rob? I'm monitoring the stim feed. You're oscillating from hell to fade-out."

"I'm trying to balance." I juggle slides. "Any better?"

"At least it's no worse," says the tech. He pauses. "Can you manage the payoff?"

The payoff. The precision-engineered and carefully timed upslope leading to climax. The Big Number. I've kept the stim tracks plateued for the past three sets. "Coming," I say. "It's coming. There's time."

"You're in bad trouble with New York if there isn't," says the tech. "I want to register a jag. Now."

"Okay," I say.

Love me

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Eat me

All of me

"Better," the tech says. "But keep it rising. I'm still only registering a sixty percent."

Sure, bastard. It isn't your brain burning with the output of these million strangers. My violence surprises me. But I push the stim up to seventy. Then Nagami goes into a synthesizer riff, and Jain sags back against a vertical rank of amps.

"Robbie?" It comes into my left ear, on the in-house com circuit reserved for performer and me alone.

"I'm here, Jain."

"You're not trying, babe."

I stare across the stage and she's looking back at me. Her eyes flash emerald in the wave from Hollis' color generator. She subvocalizes so her lips don't move.

"I mean it."

"This is new territory," I answer. "We never had a million before." I know she thinks it's an excuse.

"This is it, babe," she says. "It's tonight. Will you help me?"

I've known the question would come, though I hadn't known who'd articulate it — her or me. My hesitation stretches much longer in my head than it does in realtime. *So much passion, Rob ... It seems to build. Would you kill for me?* "Yes," I say.

"Then I love you," and breaks off as the riff ends and she struts back out into the light. I reluctantly touch the console and push the stim to seventy-five. Fifty tracks are in. *Jain, will you love me if I don't?*

A bitter look

Eighty. I engage five more tracks. Five to go. The crowd's getting damn near all of her. And, of course, the opposite's true.

A flattering word

Since I first heard her in Washington, I've loved this song the best. I push more keys. Eighty-two. Eighty-five. I know the tech's happily watching the meters.

A kiss

The last tracks cut in. *Okay, you're getting everything from the decaying food in her gut to her deepest buried childhood fears of an empty echoing house.*

Ninety.

A sword

And the song ends, one last diminishing chord, but her body continues to move. For her there is still music.

On the com circuit the tech yells: "Idiot! I'm already reading ninety. Ninety, damn it. There's still one number to go."

"Yeah," I say. "Sorry. Just ... trying to make up for previous lag-time."

He continues to shout and I don't answer. On the stage Nagami and Hollis look at each other and at

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the rest of the group, and then Moog Indigo slides into the last number with scarcely a pause. Jain turns toward my side of the stage and gives me a soft smile. And then it's back to the audience and into the song she always tops her concerts with, the number that really made her.

Fill me like the mountains

Ninety-five. There's only a little travel left in the console slides.

The tech's voice is aghast. "Are you out of your mind, Rob? I've got a ninety-five here — damned needle's about to peg. Back off to ninety."

"Say again?" I say. "Interference. Repeat, please."

"I said back off! We don't want her higher than ninety."

Fill me like the sea

Jain soars to the climax. I shove the slides all the way forward. The crowd is on its feet; I have never been so frightened in my life.

"Rob! I swear to God you're canned, you —"

Somehow Stella's on the com line too: "You son of a bitch! You hurt her —"

Jain flings her arms wide. Her back impossibly arches.

All of me

One hundred.

I cannot rationalize electronically what happens. I cannot imagine the affection and hate and lust and fear cascading into her and pouring back out. But I see the antenna mesh around her naked body glowing suddenly whiter until it flares in an actinic flash and I shut my eyes.

When I open them again, Jain is a blackened husk tottering toward the front of the stage. Her body falls over the edge into the first rows of spectators.

The crowd still thinks this is part of the set, and they love it.

XII

No good-bys. I know I'm canned. When I go into the Denver Alpertron office in another day and a half to pick up my final check, some subordinate I've never seen before gives me the envelope.

"Thanks," I say. He stares at me and says nothing.

I turn to leave and meet Stella in the hall. The top of her head comes only to my shoulders, and so she had to tilt her face up to glare at me. She says, "You're not going to be working for any promoter in the business. New York says no."

"Fine," I say. I walk past her.

Before I reach the door, she stops me by saying, "The initial report is in already."

I turn. "And?"

"The verdict will probably end up accidental death. Everybody's bonded. Jain was insured for millions. Everything will turn out all right for everyone." She stares at

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me for several moments. "Except Jain. You bastard."

We have our congruencies.

The package comes later, along with a stiff legal letter from a firm of attorneys. The substance of the message is this: "Jain Snow wished you to have possession of this. She informed you prior to her demise of her desires; please carry them out accordingly." The packet contains a chrome cylinder with a screw cap. The cylinder contains ashes; ashes and a few bone fragments. I check. Jain's ashes, unclaimed by father, friends or employer.

I drive west, away from the soiled towers of the strip city. I drive beyond the Colstrip Pits and into the mountains until the paved highway becomes narrow asphalt and then rutted earth and then only a trace, and the car can go no further. With the metal cylinder in one hand I flee on foot until I no longer hear sounds of city or human beings.

At last the trees end and I climb over bare mountain grades. I rest briefly when the pain in my lungs is too sharp to ignore. At last I reach the summit.

I scatter Jain's ashes on the wind.

Then I hurl the empty cylinder down toward the timberline; it rolls and clatters and finally is only a distant glitter on the talus slope.

"Jain!" I scream at the sky until my voice is gone and vertigo destroys my balance. The echoes die. *As Jain died.*

I lie down unpeacefully — exhausted — and sleep, and my dreams are of weathered stone. And I awake empty.

Answer to January acrostic puzzle.

Catherine L. Moore — "No Woman Born" (*Astounding Science Fiction* — 1944)

"There was hypnosis in her voice. She turned away and began to pace again, and so powerful was the human personality which she had called up about her that it beat out at them in deep pulses, as if her body were a furnace to send out those comforting waves of warmth."

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George R.R. Martin has the voice of a poet and a mind like a steel trap. This information is available to you, in slightly edited form, on the back cover of *Songs of Stars and Shadows,* where it is attributed to someone named A.J. Budrys. In the text, this information makes itself self-evident, and there it is attributable to George R.R. Martin.

Martin has come early to solid presence in SF, where it has become easy to make an initial splash followed by virtual disappearance. In this collection, whose earliest story is copyright 1973, there are nine stories in all, and all nine of them are good reading. Some are more than that. Furthermore, this is Martin's second collection. The man is a reliable producer of reliable work, and not too many of our younger writers have yet established that foothold.

Martin has other attributes. He has his own touch; it would be difficult to mistake a Martin story for anyone else's, not because he has some consistent trick of technique but because when he writes his straightforward prose it allows the personality behind it to shine through. Well, not shine — Martin's preferred light is the dim glow of dying suns. His protagonists move through ancient cities, exploring eroded landscapes within

ALGIS BUDRYS

Books

Songs of Stars and Shadows, George R.R. Martin. Pocket Books, $1.75

The Dark Design, Philip Jose Farmer. Berkley/Putnam, $9.95

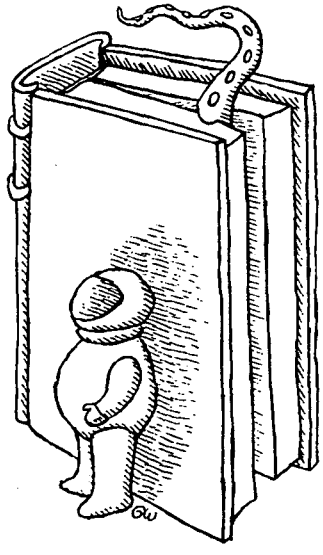
The Blue Hawk, Peter Dickinson. Ballantine (Del Rey), $1.95

We Who are About To..., Joanna Russ. Dell, $1.50

The Passing of The Dragons, Keith Roberts. Berkley, $1.75

Edd Cartier: The Known and the Unknown, Dean Cartier, Ed. $15.00. Published by Gerry de la Ree, 7 Cedarwood Lane, Saddle River, NJ 07458.

Various Borgo Press titles



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themselves. A consistent topic in his work is decadence, and its uses. His preferred setting is a universe long populated by star-travelling races in various stages of ascendancy. In that universe, Man is just one more creature, and never the greatest. Even when Martin removes his focus from that purlieu, Man is still only one aspect of Nature, and if not the least, certainly not the best.

Nor the worst. Martin's view of Man is of a fallible but hoping creature. In such stories as "This Tower of Ashes," "Patrick Henry, Jupiter, and the Little Brick Spaceship," and "...For a Single Yesterday" — three very different narratives in all other respects — Man is notably self-deluded, but striving. And this view, which is kind in those three instances, is vicious when applied to the Angels in "And Seven Times Never Kill Man," but is emphasized just as strongly.

Martin's prose style is traditional. So is his predilection for writing stories with beginnings, middles, and ends, although like most of us he doesn't always have that under full control. He is also an excellent critic, applying traditional storytelling criteria, and an excellent teacher in his SF workshop summer course at Clarke College in Dubuque, Iowa, as I have had occasion to observe. He knows what a story is, and he respects it, applying notably high intelligence to the need to satisfy the reader while illuminating some aspect of life.

It is the aspect which is always so clearly his own. Many of his stories, and some of his titles, derive from the folk-rock songs of the 1960s. He performed alternative service during Nam, and his traditionalism serves the spirit of Woodstock. He is a gentle, implacable person, and where other writers of his generation chose to overlay their work with fervid declaration, sloganeering, and techniques designed to call attention to the author, Martin is content to quietly say what the author believes to be true.

No one knows what Philip Jose Farmer believes anymore. He is too busy playing games. When well played, as in *To Your Scattered Bodies Go,* they are well worth the candle. But those who fondly believed the "Riverworld" series would end with the third book are in for a stall. And those who expected *The Fabulous Riverboat* to be followed by at least a coherent extension of that sub-plot are going to be particularly infuriated by *The Dark Design.* This third book simply plucks at old threads, introduces new ones for the same purpose, and, in 400-some pages of text, builds and crashes a lot of machinery, kills some people — ap-

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parently permanently — and loses a bunch of others, but goes nowhere.

Farmer has become self-conscious about his idea. *The Dark Design* devotes inordinate wordage to rationalizing and papering-over logical discontinuities in the original concept, as if anyone cared about that, or should care. Alternatively, characters come and go, build, crash, are dropped... at one point, Peter Frigate, Farmer's alter ego, promises that the series will contain a dozen books. At this pace, it will need them, but who will read them?

Farmer has all the equipment necessary to deal with life, and in such books as *The Lovers,* he demonstrated that. Now he plays with the appurtenances of his mind. And in this book, he shows that he is tiring of the game. What's left, Philip Jose Farmer?

The Blue Hawk is ninety per cent of a great story, if you're a Richard Adams fan as I am, and if you thought *Shardik* was a great story, as I do. In a very similar world, Peter Dickinson tells the story of Tron, the novice priest in the order of Gdu, the Hawk. Tron, perhaps in actual contact with the gods, unrelentingly and gently, perhaps helplessly, takes one small step after another, causes one minor loosening after another in the hold that the priestly establishment has over his land, and in the end is instrumental in bringing it all down, even to the point of perhaps causing permanent departure of his gods.

To do this story right, it is vitally necessary that the boy be perfectly characterized, that the mood of an ancient, theocratic civilization be firmly maintained, that its internal logic be impeccable to the point of self-evidence, and that the order of events should seem inevitable, on a rising scale of tension. Some of these things, Dickinson does. In addition, his ability to make pictures of this land is first-rate; Tron's nation, with its central river, its brooding bronze-age cities, its panoramas of irrigated fields, its mountain gorges and its constantly blue sky, comes to pervasive life, and remains in the mind to be recalled at will long after the book has been read.

But Tron and the hawk he appropriates do not. Because, superbly begun though the book is, it begins to falter past the halfway mark. Things begin to happen that are not inevitable.

In the *Shardik* type of story, in which human contact with the supernatural must walk a thin line between conjecture and literality, it will not do to finally say, as Dickinson does in a notably talky and tendentious ending, that the events

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were ordered by the gods. No. About halfway through the manuscript, the author began to stumble under the weight of his self-imposed task; three-quarters of the way through, he is staggering, and at the end, brilliant though he is, and evocative though such late scenes as the mountain battles are, he is on his knees. Under such circumstances, even someone who began as well as Tron becomes only an attractive puppet, and the final scene, which should have been supremely poignant, is therefore empty.

What Dickinson has really done is twofold. First of all, he has presented himself as an author of dazzling potential. But this work might in fact be a pseudonymous cover for Richard Adams diffidently marketing an early manuscript, so closely does *The Blue Hawk* recall the genre of *Shardik*. Second, by its failures, this book magnifies and illuminates the superb artistic success of its model.

For a really bad book, try what Samuel R. Delany on the cover apotheoses with: "Elegant and electric, this tour-de-force has got to be the finest SF novel I have read in a handful of years." Not in a handful of seconds is *We Who Are About To...* anything of the sort.

Joanna Russ is as talented an ideator as this field has seen in the past decade, and the author of one impressive story after another. But what she has here is a short story — one which would have been an effectively moody if minor piece of work at three thousand words, or a stunning novelette if done properly at ten.

Here is the story: A lifeboat from an interstellar vessel crashes on a pastoral world with a small group of people, one of whom, the viewpoint character, is a waspish kvetch. The kvetch, convinced there is no hope of rescue, convinced there are not enough people and resources in the lifeboat to set up a functioning society, insulted by the bumbling and eventually vicious attempts of her fellow passengers to force her to cooperate and to be impregnated, kills them all and sits in a cave deliberately starving herself to death.

That's it.

Actually, she has them all dead halfway through the book and has begun starving. There are 25,000 words of starving, with interludes of sitting in a brook to go to the bathroom.

It is impossible to tell whether Russ intended her viewpoint character to come across as the implacably arrogant, totally egocentric nihilist that she is. Let's assume so, for a moment; this is not the personality on which to attempt to hang 60,000 words of reader inter-

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est. No one in his or her right mind would want to get to know this character that well. For a moment, let's assume otherwise — that Russ sees this person as someone whose ideas and inner experience are of prolonged interest. Then this story begins to make sense, as a short story. The romantic Campbellian notion that castaway Terrestrials will always, by their very nature, rise above petty concerns under these circumstances to replicate technocratic society is a notion that needs deflating. A specific Campbell idea was that under these circumstances, the other survivors are justified in lobotomizing the recalcitrant female, in order to convert her into an automatic baby-making machine. That is an idea whose time for stern adjudication has come.

But Russ weds her narrative so firmly to the inside of her protagonist's petulant mind that neither the general nor the specific Campbellian proposition are called into question for the reader. The even larger exploration of the many ways in which a brilliant female is particularly maltreated in society — an exploration in which Russ is vitally interested, hopefully to the benefit of us all — is thoroughly lost, and lost doubly. First of all, our view of the entire situation is lost in waves of the protagonist's ceaseless hate, and, second, because Russ hardly ever shows, but tells, and tells, and tells, it is impossible to form an objective evaluation of the other characters, or even of the planet, which seems to abound with empty ecological niches and acts only as a bare stage. On that stage sits the narrator, talking and shaking her fist, defecating in the brook, proving herself right if it kills her, having already proved that might makes right. If that is the message of the brilliant female, next time it should be sent prepaid.

I cannot imagine why Dell published this book. If it were in any other genre, any competent editor would have known better. I suspect that, once again, Sci-Fi is in the hands of someone who thinks that anything with spaceships and half-baked logic is the kind of stuff Sci-Fi readers will buy despite the fact that the editor personally doesn't understand its appeal. Well, Dell Sci-Fi person, that makes two errors in your judgment. Yours too, Chip.

Keith Roberts is the best English SF writer. He is not the best novelist — Arthur C. Clarke still is, I suppose, or David Compton when he's on — but by a measurable margin, Keith Roberts at anything less than novel length* can do it all. *The Passing of The Dragons* causes

*Pavane, *a superb book, is a collection of short stories butted together.*

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me to say all that.

There are apparently no limits to Roberts' range. The twelve stories in this collection — one, "The White Boat," is from *Pavane* — cover everything from the *Shardik*-like milieu of "The Lake of Tuonela" to the disquieting half-jape of "Boulter's Canaries." "Weinachtsabend" is a what-if story about the Nazi regime in England, and will make your flesh creep. "The Grain Kings" would have been rejected by John Campbell with infuriated regret. "Manscarer" is a Harlan Ellison story told right side out. And so forth.

Logic dictates that Roberts must in fact have limits to the range of themes he is willing to tackle, and observation shows that he has a tendency to underplay too much, which is sometimes to the detriment of a given piece of work. But it is going to take a full scale critical investigation to determine those limits, because Roberts does not let you see them, and there is never anything wrong with any given Roberts story that is so bad you expect anything less but the best from the next one.

And he has engaging recurrent attributes. The verisimilitude with which he describes obsolete or variant machinery — the steam road engines and semaphore station in *Pavane*, the canal lock mechanisms in "The Lake of Tuonela," the harvesters in "The Grain Kings" — is a delight to the mind. The sentence and paragraph rhythms with which he evokes the pulsebeat of an ocean in "The Deeps" or the emotions of Becky in "The White Boat," are a mature strength.

He has yet to learn how to bring all this to bear on a major theme over novel length. Perhaps this is because he can do so much in so few words that it will require a towering central statement before he writes a book he cannot exhaust before he completes it. But not everyone needs to be the novelist. That may be where the money is, but for some people it's not where the good work is.

Edd Cartier is still alive, but no longer illustrating, working, instead, in a design studio, which is where the money is. Ah, well. Gerry de la Ree has now brought out the handsomely produced, necessarily high-priced *Edd Cartier: The Known and The Unknown*, edited by Cartier's son, Dean, and that's better than nothing. Hardbound, with 8½ x 11 glossy pages, the book reproduces many of the excellent black-and-white drawings Cartier did for *Unknown*, *Astounding*, and Gnome Press.

Cartier has had a long-running influence on SF illustration. Frank Kelly Freas, for example, to this day shows traces of his early regard

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for the man's work, and when one considers that Stephen Fabian in turn displays an open debt to Freas, the manner in which one artist hands on to others begins to make itself plain.

Cartier in the 1950s and '40s was one of SF's best human anatomists and a skilled portrayer of objects. A stool in the hands of one of his characters was a solid, heavy weapon; a ship's rail had obviously seen use, could clearly support a boarding pirate's weight; a typewriter was real enough so that one could hear the clunky sound it would make. He did not do lines on paper — he used lines on paper to do realizations. His spaceships were not as successful — elaborate, but somehow too slick, and invariably phallic; cartoon spaceships. Futuristic machinery and architecture were not what he could truly see in his mind. Nor, really, were people. If there is any predominant influence visible on Cartier, it is Walt Disney's treatment of people.

But Cartier's greatest strength, his superb private vision, lies precisely in that he out-Disneys Disney in his portrayal of non-humans. The marvelous elves and gnomes for *Unknown!* The weighty, moving, odorous alien creatures for *Astounding!* A Cartier alien is anatomized to the last bonelet, the ultimate molecule of tissue.

Cartier's furniture is real. His people are cartoons, and his future is synthetic. But his sense of life, his feel for that which stirs not, but might stir... ah, now, we have not seen his equal in that.

Send Gerry the money. He's a publisher with good ideas.

On the stands where you buy this magazine, you will, if you are me, occasionally see the productions of Borgo Press. There is, for instance, an original "science fiction farce" by C. Everett Cooper, called *Up Your Asteroid.* On the serious side, there is Borgo's "Milford" series of critical studies on "Popular Writers of Today," including *The Farthest Shores of Ursula K. LeGuin* and *The Bradbury Chronicles,* both by George Edgar Slusser. You will have wondered if they are worth buying, if the critical studies are of merit.

Well, George Edgar Slusser wouldn't know what creativity is in the unlikely event it deigned to bite him on the asteroid, and that other book is exactly like what it sounds like, only less skillful than you expected.

Now you know.

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Stephen Donaldson is the son of medical missionaries who worked with lepers in India. Mr. Donaldson grew up overseas, came to the U. S. to go to college in Ohio and married Lynn K. Plagge "after chasing her halfway around the world." He was working for a Ph. D. in 1971, but "I didn't like it much because I wasn't writing fiction. So when Lynn found herself a good job, I 'dropped out' without a qualm, and I've been writing full time ever since." Mr. Donaldson's major work is a three volume epic fantasy The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever. *which was recently published to critical acclaim by Holt, Rinehart and Winston. The superior story you are about to read is Stephen Donaldson's first published short story, and we're happy to tell you that we have another one waiting in the wings.*

The Lady in White

by STEPHEN R. DONALDSON

I am a sensible man. I have been blacksmith, wheelwright and ironmonger for this village for seven years; and I have not seen the need to believe in magic, no matter what that loon, mad Festil my brother, says. I have not had need of magic. I am a man who does what he wills without such things — without such nonsense, I might once have said. This village is small, it's true, but not so small that Mardik the blacksmith does not stand as tall as any man here, fletcher or stonemason or vintner. I have all the work I choose to do, and my asking is fair because I have no need to ask for more. There is no woman here, widow or maid, who scorns the touch of my hands, though it's true my hands have the grime of the smithy in them and are not like to look clean again. Men listen when I speak; and if they do not hear me well, they can hear my fist well enough, and better than most. For my sake they treat mad Festil with respect.

Yet that respect is less than his desert. Loon that he is, he is wise in his way, though the village does not see it. He is younger than I, and less of stature by a span of my hand, but when he smiles the look in his face is stronger than fists, and many are the angers he has brought to an end by gazing upon them with his blind eyes. For this I esteem him more than our village can understand. And for one thing more. Mad Festil my brother came to me when I was in need, brought close to death by the magic of the Lady in White.

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Magic I call it, lacking another name for the thing I do not understand. Fools speak of magic with glib tongues that have no knowledge; they seek a respect that they cannot win with their own hands. Children prate of magic when they have taken fright in the Deep Forest. Well, the Deep Forest is strange, it's true. The trees are tall beyond tallness, and the gloom under them is cunning, and men lose their way easily. Our village sits with its back to the mighty trees like a man known for bravery, but ofttimes tales are heard of things which befall those who venture into the Deep Forest, and in storms even the priests gaze upon that tall darkness with fear. And fools, too, are not always what they seem.

But fools and children speak only of what they hear from others, who themselves only speak of what they hear from others. Even the priests can put no face to their fear without consulting Scripture. I am neither fool nor child. I am not a priest, to shudder at tales of Lucifer. I am Mardik the blacksmith, wheelwright and ironmonger; and I make what I will, do what I will, have what I will. I fear not Satan nor storms nor black trees.

I speak only of what I have seen with my own eyes, and I was not struck blind by what I saw as Festil was. I have kissed the lips of the thing I do not understand and have been left to die in the vastness of the Deep Forest.

I say I do not believe in magic, and I hold to what I say. Mayhap for a time I became ill in my mind. Mayhap, all unknowing, I ate of the mushroom of madness which grows at night under the ferns far in the Deep Forest. Mayhap many things, none of them magical. I do not say them because I cannot say them and be sure. This I do say. For a time under the spell of the Lady in White, I had need of a thing that was not in me; and because I had it not, I was left to die. If that thing has another name than magic, mad Festil knows it, not I. He smiles it to himself in his blindness, and does not speak.

He was fey from his earliest youth, like a boy who knew that when he became a man he would lose his sight. My remembering of him goes back to the sound of his voice in the darkness of our loftroom. Though sleep was upon me, he would remain awake, sitting upright in the strawbed we shared, speaking of things that were exciting to him — of dragons and quests and arcane endeavors, things mysterious and wonderful. He spoke of them as if they were present to him in the darkness, and the power of his speaking kept me awake as well. I cuffed him more than once, but often I listened and let him speak

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and laughed to myself.

At times when the excitement was strong, he would say, "Do you believe in magic, my brother? Do you not believe in magic?" Then I would laugh aloud. And if the excitement was very strong, he would become stubborn. "Surely," he would say, "surely you believe that there is some witchery in the Deep Forest?" Then I would say, "A tree is a tree, and paths are few. It does not need magic to explain how fools and children lose their way. And if they come back to the village with strange tales to excuse their fear and foolishness, that also does not need magic." And then if he pressed me further, I would cuff him and go to sleep.

For this reason, I did not esteem Festil my brother as we grew to manhood. And for other reasons, also. I have no wife because I have no need of wife. No woman scorns me, and I take what I will. It pleases me to live my life without the bonds of a wife. But Festil has no wife because no woman in the village, be she ripe and maidenly enough to make a man grind his teeth — no woman pleases him. I believe he is a virgin to this day.

And when our father, the blacksmith before me, died, I did not learn to esteem my brother more. He was a dreamer and a loon and understood less than nothing of the workings of the smithy. So all the labor came to me, and until I grew strong enough to bear it, I did not take pleasure in it.

Also his speaking of our father's death was worse than anile. Our father died from the kick of a horse whose hooves he was trimming. A placid plowbeast that gave its master never a moment's trouble suddenly conceived a desire to see the color of our father's brains. To this Festil cried, "Bewitchment!" He took a dagger and spent long hours in the Deep Forest, seeking to find and slay the caster of the spell. But I looked upon the beast when it grew calm again and found that our father's trimming blade had slipped in his hand and had cut the frog of the hoof. Bewitchment, forsooth! I saw no need to treat mad Festil with respect.

Yet he was my brother, kind and gentle, and willing in his way to help me at the forge, though it's true his help was often less than a help. And at times he fought the fools in the village for my sake when he would not fight for his own. I grew to be glad of his company and tolerant of his talk. And I knew that a matter to be taken seriously had arisen when he came to me and said that he had seen the Lady in White.

"The Lady in White!" he said softly, and his eyes shone, and his face was full of light. I would have laughed to see any other man act

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such a calf. But this was Festil my brother, who had not so much as touched his lips to the breasts of any woman but his mother. And in past days I had heard talk of this Lady in White — as who had not? The men who had seen her had told their tales until no ear in the village was empty of their prattle. For three nights now, every tankard of ale I took at the Red Horse was flavored with talk of the Lady in White. I cannot say that I was partial to the taste.

Fimm the fruiterer had seen her, with Forin his son, who was almost a man. Forin had gone senseless with love, said Fimm, and had crept away from his father in the night to follow the road taken by the Lady — into the Deep Forest, said Fimm. For two nights now Forin had not returned, and no one in the village had seen him.

"Well, lads are wild," said I, "and a Lady in White is as good a cure for wildness as any. He will return when she has taught him to be some little tamer."

But, nay — Fimm would not agree. And Pandeler the weaver was of the same mind, though Pandeler does not take kindly to nonsense. He himself had seen the Lady in White. She had come to his shop to buy his finest samite, and there his two sons, the twins Paoul and Pendit, had seen her. They had come to blows over her — they who were as close to each other as two fingers on the same fist — and Paoul had gone away in search of her, followed soon afterward by Pendit, though they were both of them under the banns to be married to the ripe young daughters of Swonsil the fletcher.

Yet that was not the greatest wonder of it, said Pandeler. Neither of his sons had been seen in the village for two days — but that also was not the greatest wonder. Nay, the wonder was that Pandeler himself had near arisen in the black night and followed his sons into the Deep Forest, hoping to find the Lady in White before them. He had only refrained, he said, because he was too old to make a fool of himself in love — and because, if the truth were known, it would be that he was altogether fond of Megan his wife.

"What is she like, then," said I, "this Lady in White?" It was in my mind that any woman able to lead Pandeler the weaver by the nose would be worth a look or twain.

But he gave no answer. His eyes gazed into his tankard, and if he saw the Lady in White there, he did not say what he saw.

Then other men spoke. If all the tales were true, this Lady had already consumed some half dozen of our young men, and no one of us knew a thing of her but that she came to the village from the Deep

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Forest and that when she left she took herself back into the Deep Forest.

Well, I thought of all this often in my smithy — and not with displeasure, it's true. If our young men were fool enough to lose themselves in the Deep Forest — why, soon the village would be full of maidens in need of consolation. And who better to console them than Mardik the blacksmith?

But that look in Festil my brother's face stood the matter on other ground. When he came to me and said that he had seen the Lady in White, I put down my hammer and considered him seriously. Then I took a step to bring myself close to him and said, "It's come to that, has it? When will you be after her?"

"Now!" he said gladly. It pleased him to think that I understood his desire. "I only came to tell you before I left."

"You are wiser than you think, my brother," said I. And because I am not a man who hesitates when he has made his decision, I swung my fist at once and hit mad Festil a blow that stretched him on the dirt of the smithy. "I have no wish to lose my only brother," I said, though it's true he was not like to hear me. Then I bore him sleeping to our hut and put him in his bed and contrived a way to bolt his door. When I was sure of him, I went back to my forge.

But I was wrong. The blood of our father flows in him as well, after all, and he is stronger than he seems. When I returned home at midday, I found him gone. He had been able to break the wallboard that held my bolt in place. Without doubt, he was on his way into the Deep Forest.

I went after him. What else could I do? He was a dreamer and a loon, and he knew more of witches than of smithing. But he was my brother, and no other could take his place. Pausing only to slip my hunting knife into the top of my boot, I left the house at a run. It was my hope to catch him before he managed to lose himself altogether.

I ran to the stables and threw a saddle onto Leadenfoot, the grey nag that draws my wagon when I go to do work at the outlying farms. Leadenfoot is no swiftling — what need has a blacksmith's wagon for swiftness? — but when I strike him hard he is faster than my legs. And he fears nothing, because he lacks the sense for fear — which is also an advantage in a blacksmith's nag. So he heeded the argument of my quirt and did not shy as many horses do when I sent him running down the old road into the Deep Forest.

That road is the only way which enters the forest, and all the talkers at the Red Horse had agreed that

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when the Lady in White left the village she walked this road. It began as a wagon track as good as any, but it has been long disused and no longer goes to any place, though surely once it did in times so long past that they have been forgotten by all the village. Now only mad priests claim knowledge of the place where the old road goes. They say it goes to Hell.

Hell, forsooth! I have no use for such talk. Yet in its way Hell is as good a name for the Deep Forest as any. As I ran Leadenfoot along the road at his best speed, the trees and the brush were so thick that I could see nothing through them, though the sun was bright overhead; and birds answered the sound of Leadenfoot's shoes with cries like scorn. I called out for Festil, but the woods took my voice and gave back no reply.

And in a league or two the road grew narrower. Grass grew across it, then flowers and brush. Fallen limbs cluttered the way, and the black trees leaned inward. Leadenfoot made it clear to me that he would not run any more, though I hit him more than I am proud to admit. And nowhere did I see any sign of Festil.

How had he eluded me? I had not left him alone more than half the morning, and he had been sleeping soundly when I had bolted his door. He could not have awakened immediately. He could not have broken the wallboard without effort and time. He could not have outrun me. Yet he was gone. The Deep Forest had swallowed him as completely as the jaws of death.

Railing against him for a fool and a dreamer, I left Leadenfoot and searched ahead on foot. Shouting, cursing, searching, I followed the road until it became a path, and the path became a trail, and the trail vanished. Almost I lost my way for good and all. When I found it again, I had no choice but to return the way I had come. All about me, the birds of the Deep Forest cried like derision.

At the place where I had left Leadenfoot, I found him gone also. This day everything was doomed to betray me. At first, I feared that the senseless nag had broken his reins and wandered away off the road. But then I found his shoe marks leading back down the road toward the village. I followed as best I could, and now there was a fear in me that darkness would come upon me before I could escape these fell trees.

But in the gloom of sunset, I gained a sight of Leadenfoot, walking slowly along the road with a rider upon his back.

I ran to catch the nag and jerked the reins, pulling the rider to the ground. Mad Festil.

"Mardik," he said. "Mardik

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my brother." There was joy in his voice, and there was joy in his face, and all his movements as he rose to his feet and clasped me in his arms were as certain as truth. And yet he was blind. His eyes were gone in a white glaze, and I did not need the noon sun to see that there was no sight in them.

I held him with all the strength of my anger and pain. "What has she done to you?" I said.

But my grip gave him no hurt. "I have seen her," he said.

"You are blind!" I cried at him, seeking to turn aside the joy in his face.

"Yet I have seen her," he said. "I have seen her, Mardik my brother. I have entered her cottage and have won through its great wonders to the greatest wonder of all. I have seen the Lady in White in all her beauty."

"She has blinded you!" I shouted.

"No," he said. "It is only that my eyes have been filled by her beauty, and there is no other thing bright enough to outshine her."

Then I found that I could not answer his joy, and after a moment I gave it up. I did not say to him that he was mad—that there was no cottage, no place of wonder, no Lady who could blind him with her beauty unless she had seduced him to eat the mushroom of madness and had done him harm by choice. I stored these things up amid the anger in my heart, but I did not speak them. I put Festil onto Leadenfoot's back and mounted behind him, and together we rode out of the Deep Forest in the last dusk.

That night, with mad Festil sleeping the sleep of bliss in our hut, I went to the Red Horse as was my custom. Nothing I said of my brother's folly — or his blindness. I listened rather, sifting through the talk about me for some new word of the Lady in White. But no word was said, and at last I spoke my thought aloud. I asked if any of the young men who had followed the Lady into the Deep Forest had returned.

The older men were silent, and the younger did not speak, but in his own time Pandeler the weaver bestirred himself and said, "Pendit. Pendit my son has returned. Alone."

I saw there in his face that he believed his other son Paoul dead. Yet I asked him despite his grief: "And what says Pendit? How does he tell his tale?"

With head bowed, Pandeler said, "He tells nothing. No word has he spoken. He sits as I sit now and does not speak." And in the firelight of the hearth it was plain for all to see that there were tears on the face of Pandeler, who was as brave a man as any in the village.

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Then I returned to our hut. Festil my brother slept with a smile on his mouth, but I did not sleep. My heart was full of retribution, and there was no rest in me.

The next morning, I spoke with Festil concerning the Lady in White and the Deep Forest, though it's true that all the speaking was mine, for he would say nothing of what had happened to him. Only he said, "My words would have no meaning to you." And he smiled his joy, wishing to content me with that answer.

But when I asked him how he had come to be riding Leadenfoot out of the Deep Forest, he did reply. "When I had seen her," he said, "I was no longer in her cottage. I was in the dell that cups her cottage as a setting cups its gem, and Leadenfoot was there. I heard him cropping grass near at hand. He came to me when I spoke his name, and I mounted him and let him bear me away. For that I must ask your pardon, my brother. I knew not that you had ridden him in search of me. I believed that the Lady in White had brought him for me, in consideration of my blindness." Then he laughed. "As in truth she did, Mardik my brother — though you scowl and mutter to yourself at the thought. You are the means she chose to bring Leadenfoot to me."

The means she chose, forsooth! He spoke of magic again, though he did not use the word. And yet in one way he had the right of the matter, despite his blindness. My scowl was heavy on my face, and I was muttering as I mutter now. Therefore I swore at him, though I knew it would give him pain. "May Heaven damn me," I said, "if ever again I serve any whim of hers." Then I left him and went to the smithy to bespeak my anger with hammer and anvil. For a time the fire of my forge was no hotter than my intent against this Lady in White.

But all my angers and intents were changed on an instant when a soft voice reached me through the clamor of my pounding. I turned and found the Lady herself there before me.

She bore in her hands a black old pot which had worn through the bottom, and in her soft voice she asked me to mend it for her. But I did not look at the pot and gave no thought to what she asked. I was consumed utterly by the sight and sound of her.

Her form was robed all in whitest samite, and her head was crowned as if in bronze by a wealth of red-yellow hair that fell unbound to her shoulders, and her eyes were like the heavens of the night, star-bright and fathomless, and her voice was the music that makes men laugh or weep, according to

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their courage. Her lips were full for kisses but not too full for loveliness, and her breasts made themselves known through her robe like the need for love, and her skin had that alabaster softness that cries out to be caressed. Altogether, she struck me so full with desire that I would have taken her there in the dirt of the smithy and counted the act for treasure. But her gaze had the power to withhold me. She placed her pot in my hands with a smile and turned slowly and walked away, and her robe clung cunningly to the sway of her hips, and I did nothing but stare openly after her like the veriest calf.

But I am not a man who hesitates; and when she had left my sight among the huts on her way back to the old road and the Deep Forest, I did not hesitate. I banked the fires of my forge and closed my smithy and went home. There in my room I bathed myself, though I do not bathe often, it's true; and when I had removed some of the grime of smithing from my limbs, I donned my Easter garments, the bold-stitched tunic and the brown pants with leather leggings which the widow Anuell had made for me. Thus I readied myself to depart.

But when I turned from my preparations, I found Festil before me. He was laughing — not the laughter of derision, but the laughter of joy. "A bath, Mardik!" he said. "You have seen her."

"I have seen her," I said.

"Ah, Mardik my brother," he said, and he groped his blind way to me to embrace me. "I wish you well. You are a good man. It is a test she gives you now. If you do not falter or fail, she will fulfill your heart's desire."

"That is as it may be," I answered. But in my own heart I said, Then I will not falter or fail, and you will not be blind long, Festil my brother. I returned his embrace briefly. Soon I had left our hut, and the village was behind me, and I was walking along the old road into the Deep Forest, and there was an unwonted eagerness in my stride.

Striken with desire as I was, however, I did not altogether lose sense. I took careful note of the passing trees on my way, finding landmarks for myself and searching for any path by which the Lady in White might have left the road. I discovered none, no sign that any Lady lived near this track, no sign that any Lady however white had ever walked this way. In a league or two, my heart began to misgive me. Yet in time I learned that I had not missed my goal. For when I neared the place where I had tethered Leadenfoot the day before, I came upon a branching in the road.

A branching, I say, though I do not hope to be believed. I will swear to any man who asks it that

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no branching was there when I came this way in search of Festil. But that is not needed. It is plain to all who dare travel that road that there is no branching now. Yet I found a branching. That is sure. If I had not, then none of the things that followed could have taken place.

In my surprise, I walked along this other road and shortly came to the dell and the cottage of which Festil my brother had spoken. And he had spoken rightly. Safe and sunlit among the gloom of the trees was a hollow rich with flowers, soft with greensward, and cupped in the hollow was a small stone cottage. Its walls had been whitewashed until they gleamed in the sun, and all the wood of its frames and roof had been painted red. White curtains of finest lace showed in the windows, and beneath the windows lay beds of columbine and peony. Faint white smoke rose from the chimney, showing to my keen desire that the Lady was within.

I went with heart pounding to the red door, and there I paused as if I, Mardik the blacksmith, were unsure of himself, so great and confused were my lust and my anger.

But then I recollected myself, put aside my unseemly hesitation. With my strong hand I knocked at the door, and there was both confidence and courtesy in the way I summoned the Lady in White.

The door opened, swung inward, though I saw no one, heard no one.

Then in truth began the thing for which I have no other name but magic. Many things in the world are strange, and magic is not needed to explain them. But in this thing I am beyond all my reckoning, and I know no explanation other than that I became ill in my mind or ate of the mushroom of madness or by some other means lost myself. But Festil my brother, who is wise in his way, says that I am neither mad nor ill, and I must believe him when I cannot believe the thing of which I speak. He was there before me, and this thing named magic cost him his sight.

But magic or no, I have chosen to speak, and I will speak. My word is known and trusted, and no man in the village dares call me liar or fool, though at times I seem a fool to myself, it's true. This, then, is the thing that befell me.

As the door opened, I stepped inward, into the cottage, so that no effort could be made to deny me admittance. Within, the air seemed somewhat dark to my sun-accustomed eyes, and for a moment I was not certain that I saw what I saw. But beyond question I did see it, just as it was. Behind me through the doorway was the sunlight and the green grass of the dell that cupped the cottage. But before me

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was no cottage room, no cozy hearth and small kitchen. I stood in a huge high hall like the forecourt of an immense keep.

The ceiling was almost lost to sight above me, but even so I could see that its beams were as thick as the thickest trees of the Deep Forest. The floor space before me was all of polished grey stone, and it was large enough to hold a dozen cottages such as the one I had just entered. A stone's throw to my left, a stairway as wide as a road came down into the hall from levels above mine. And an equal distance to my right, a hearth deep enough to hold my smithy entire blazed with logs too great for any man to lift. The light came from this fire, and from tall windows high in the wall behind me. And all about these prodigious stone walls hung banners like battle pennons.

Two of these held something familiar to me. Woven large in the center of one was the weft mark of Paoul son of Pandeler the weaver. And displayed across the other was a great bright apple. At this I ground my teeth, for it was known in all the village that Forin son of Fimm the fruiterer took pride in his apples.

Now in truth there was no hesitation in me, though this high castle hall sorely baffled all my reckoning. My hands ached to entwine themselves in the bronzen hair of the Lady, and my mouth was tight with kisses or curses. When my eyes were fully accustomed to the keep-light, I espied an arched entryway opposite me. It had the aspect of an entrance into the less public parts of this castle, and I strode toward it at once. As I moved, the air thronged with the echo of my boot-steps.

Surprised as I was by the strangeness of this place, and by the meaning of the pennons about the walls, I had at first failed to note a small table standing in the very center of the hall. But as I neared it, I considered it closely. It was ornately gilt-worked, and it stood between me and the arched entryway as if it had been placed there for some purpose. When I came to it, I saw that on it lay a silver tray like a serving dish, polished until it reflected the walls and ceiling without flaw. All its workmanship was excellent, but I saw no reason for its presence there, and so I stepped aside to pass around the table toward the far entryway.

At my next step, I struck full against the outer door of the cottage. Of a sudden there was sunlight on my back, and my eyes were blurred by the brightness of the whitewashed walls. The dell lay about me as fragrant as if I had not left it to enter that place of witchery, and the red door was closed in my face.

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Then for a time I stood motionless, as still as Leadenfoot when the fit comes upon him and he stops to consider the depth of his own stupidity. It seemed to me that the mere taking of air into my lungs required great resolve, that the beating of my heart required deliberate choice, so unutterable was my astonishment. But then I perceived the foolishness of my stance and took hold of myself. Though the act gave me a pang akin to fear, I lifted my hand and knocked at the door again.

There was no answer. As my enstupidment turned to ire, I knocked at the door, pounded at it, but there was no answer. I shook mightily on the handle, kicked at the door, heaved against it with my shoulder. There was no answer and no opening. The door withstood me as if it were stone.

Then I ran cursing around the cottage and strove to gain entrance another way. But there was no other door. And I could not break any window, neither with fist nor with stone.

At last it was the thought of the Lady in White that checked me. I seemed to feel her within her walls, laughing like the scornful birds of the Deep Forest. So I bit my anger into silence, and I turned on my heel, and I strode away from the cottage and the dell without a backward glance. And through my teeth I muttered to her in a voice that only I could hear, "Very well, my fine Lady. Believe that you have beaten me if you will. You will learn that you scorn me at your peril."

But when I regained the old road, I ran and ran on my way back to the village, wearying my unwonted fury until I became master of myself once again.

When I returned to our hut, I found Festil my brother sitting in wait for me on the stoop. Hearing my approach, he said, "Mardik?" And I replied, "Festil."

"Did you —?" he said.

"I failed," I said. I had become myself again and was not afraid to speak the truth.

For a moment, I saw a strange pain in my brother's face, but then the gaze of his blindness brightened, and he said, "Mardik my brother, did you take the Lady a gift?"

"A gift?" said I.

Then Festil laughed at my surprise. "A gift!" he said. "What manner of suitor are you, that you do not take a gift to the lady of your heart?"

"A gift, forsooth!" I said. "I am not accustomed to need gifts to win my way." But then I reflected that mad Festil my brother, loon and dreamer though he was, had had more success than I with the Lady in White. "Well, a gift, then," I said. Considering his blindness and

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his happy smile, I asked, "And what was your gift?"

His laugh became the mischievous laugh of a boy. "I stole a white rose from the arbor of the priests," he said.

Stole a rose? Aye, verily, that had the touch of mad Festil upon it. But I am not like him. I am Mardik the blacksmith, wheelwright and ironmonger. I had no need to steal roses. Therefore I slept confident that night, planning how I would make my gift.

Dawn found me in my smithy, with the music of the anvil in my heart. The blade of a discarded plowshare I put into the forge, and I worked the bellows until the iron was as white as sun-fire. Then I doubled the blade over and hammered it flat while the smithy ran with bright sparks as the impurities were stricken away. Then I tempered it in the trough and put it in the forge again and worked the bellows so that the fire roared. Again I doubled it, hammered it flat, tempered it. Again I placed it in the forge. And when I had doubled it once again, hammered it to the shape I desired, and tempered it. I had formed a knife blade that no hand in the village could break.

To the blade I attached a handle of ox horn, and then I gave the knife a keen edge on the great grindstone made by our father in his prime, when Festil and I were young. And all the while I worked, my heart sang its song, using the name of the Lady in White for melody.

My task was done before the passing of midday. With the new blade gleaming in my hand, I determined at once to assay that cottage of bewitchment without awaiting a new day. I returned to our hut to take food. I spoke pleasantly with Festil my brother, who listened to my voice with both gladness and concern in his face, as if the hazards of the Lady were as great as the rewards. But when I sought to learn more from him concerning the "test," he turned his head away and would not speak.

Well, I felt that I had no need of further counsel. He had told me of the gift, and that was enough. I put the new knife in my belt and went just as I was, begrimed and proud from the smithy, to visit again the dell and the cottage of the Lady in White.

On my way between the dark and forbidding tree walls of the Deep Forest, my confidence was weakened by a kind of dread — a fear that the branching of the road would be gone or lost. But it was not. It lay where I had left it, and it led me again to the dell of flowers and grass and the cottage of white walls and red wood.

At the door I paused, took the

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blade from my belt and held it before me. "Now, then, my fine Lady," I muttered softly, "let us see if any man in the village can match such a gift as this." With the butt of the knife, I rapped on the door.

Again the door swung inward. And again I saw no one, heard no one.

I entered at once and found myself once more in that huge high hall, castle forecourt spacious enough to hold a dozen such cottages. But now I did not waste time in wonder. Though the image of the Lady in White filled my very bones with desire — and though the pennons of the dead (young men consumed by whatever hunger drove that cruel and irrefusable woman) did not fail to raise my anger — still I had not lost all sense. I knew my time was short. If I were to fail another test, I meant to do so and be gone from this place before day's end. No man would choose to travel the Deep Forest at night.

So I strode without delay across that long stone floor toward the table in the center of the hall. The light was dimmer than it had been the previous day — the afternoon sun did not shine into those high windows — and this dimness seemed to fortify the echoes, so that the sound of my feet marched all about me like a multitude as I approached the table. But I did not hesitate. Nor did I trouble myself to make any speech of gift giving. I held up the knife so that any hidden eyes might see it. Then I placed it on the silver tray.

There was no response from the castle. No voices hailed my gift, and the Lady in White did not appear. I stood there before the table for a moment, allowing her time for whatever answer seemed fit to her. But when none came, I took my resolve in both hands and stepped around the table toward the arched entryway at the far end of the hall. Almost I winced, half expecting to find myself in the dell once more with the cottage door shut in my face.

But I did not. Instead, another thing came upon me — a thing far worse than any unexplained vanishing of hall and locking of cottage door.

Before I had gone five paces past the table, I heard a scream that turned the strength to chaff in my limbs. It rent the air. It echoed, echoed, about my head like the howling of the damned. A gust of chill wind near extinguished the blaze in the hearth, and some cloud covered the sun, so that the verges of the hall were filled with night. I spun where I was, searching through the gloom for the inhuman throat which had made that scream.

It was repeated, and repeated. And then the creature that made it came down the broad stairs from

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the upper levels — came running with murder in its face and a great broadsword upraised in its foul hands, shrieking for my blood.

It was fiend-loathsome and ghoul-terrible, a thing of slime and scales and fury. Red flames ran from its eyes. In the dimness its broadsword had the blue sheen of lightning. Its jaws were stretched to rend and kill, and it ran as if it lived for no other purpose than to hack my heart out from between my ribs for food.

The fear of it unmanned me. Even now, looking back on things that are past, I am not ashamed to say that I was lost in terror — so much lost that I was unable to take the knife from my boot to defend myself. The creature screamed as it charged, and I screamed also.

Then I was lying on the greensward of the dell, and the afternoon sunlight was slanting through the treetops to glint in my eyes. The cottage stood near at hand, but the door was closed, and the windows had a look of abandonment. Only the curling of smoke from the chimney showed that the Lady in White was yet within, untouched by any desire or anger of mine.

Stricken and humbled, I left the dell and returned to the old road. As the sun drew near to setting, I went back through the Deep Forest toward the village.

But there was another thing in me beyond the humbling, and I came to know it soon. For while I was still within the bounds of the forest, with the hand of the coming night upon me, I met a man upon the road. When we drew near enough to know each other, I saw that he was Creet the stonemason. He stood tall in the village, and it's true that his head overtopped mine, though mayhap he was not as strong as I. We were somewhat friends, for, like me, he had done much wooing but no marrying —and somewhat wary one of another, for we had only measured our strength together once, and there had been no clear issue to that striving. But I gave no thought to such things now. For Creet the stonemason was walking into the Deep Forest at dusk, and there was a spring of eagerness in his step.

Seeing him, the other thing in me was roused, and I shifted my path to bar his way. "Go back, mason," said I. "She is not for you."

"I have seen her," he replied without hesitation. "How can I go back? Mayhap you have failed to win her, blacksmith. Creet the stonemason will not."

"You speak in ignorance, Creet," said I. "She has slain men of this village. That *I* have seen."

"Men!" he scoffed. "Paoul and Forin? They were boys, not men." Clearly, he did not doubt himself.

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He placed a hand on my chest to push me from his way.

But I am Mardik the blacksmith, and I also can act without hesitation when I choose. I shrugged aside his hand and struck him with all my strength.

Then for a time we fought together there in the old road and the Deep Forest. Night came upon us, but we did not heed it. We struck one another, clinched, fell, arose to strike and clinch and fall again. Creet was mighty in his way, and his desire for the Lady in White was strong beyond bearing. But the other thing in me had raised its head. It was a thing of iron, a thing not to be turned aside by failure or fear or stonemasons. After a time, I struck Creet down, so that he lay senseless before me in the road.

Thus I chose my way — the way that brought me near to dying in the end, lost in the maze of the Deep Forest. From the moment that I struck down Creet the stonemason, I gave no more thought to humbling or fear. I was Mardik the blacksmith, wheelwright and ironmonger. I was accustomed to have my will and did not mean to lose it at the hand of any lady, however strange. I lifted Creet and stretched him across my shoulders and bore him with me. So I became the first man in my lifetime to find his way out of the Deep Forest in darkness.

I bore my burden direct to the Red Horse, where many of the men of the village were gathered, as was their custom in the evening. Giving no heed to their surprise, I thrust open the door and bore Creet into the aleroom and dropped him there on a table among the tankards. He groaned in his slumber, but to him, also, I gave no heed.

"Hear me well," I said to the silence about me. "I am Mardik the blacksmith, and if Creet cannot stand against me, then no man in this village can hope otherwise. Now I say this: the Lady in White is mine. From this moment forth, no other man will follow her. If your sons see her, lock them in their rooms and stand guard at the door. If your brothers behold her, bind them hand and foot. If your friends are taken with the sight of her, restrain them with shackles of iron. And if you wish to go to her — why, then, tell your wives or your maidens or your mothers to club you senseless. For the Lady in White kills whom she does not keep. And I will be no more gentle to those who dare cross my way. The Lady in White is mine!"

Still there was silence for a moment in the aleroom. Then Pandeler the weaver rose to his feet and met my gaze with his grief for Paoul his son. "Will you kill her, then, Mardik the blacksmith?" he said.

"Pandeler," said I, "I will do

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with her whatever seems good to me."

I would have gone on to say that, whatever I did, no more young men of the village would lose their lives, but before I could speak, another man came forward to face me, and I saw that he was Gruel the mad priest. His habit was all of black, and his long grey beard trembled with passion, and his bony hands both clung to the silver crucifix which hung about his neck. "She is the bride of Satan!" he said, fixing me with his wild eye. "Your soul will roast in hell!"

"God's blood!" I roared in answer. "Then it will be my soul that roasts and not the souls of innocent calves who cannot so much as say aye or nay to their own mothers!" Then I left the aleroom and flung shut the door of the Red Horse so that the boards cracked.

Returning homeward, I found our hut all in darkness, and for a moment there was a fear in me that Festil had gone again into the Deep Forest. But then I recalled that Festil my brother had no need of light. I entered the hut and found him in his bed, awake in the night. When I opened his door, he said, "Mardik," knowing me without doubt, for in the darkness he was no more blind than I.

"Festil," I said. "Again I failed."

"It was very fearsome," he said, and in his voice I heard two things that surprised me — sorrow and a wish to console me. "Do not reproach yourself."

"Festil," I said again. My own voice was stern. There was a great need in me for the knowledge he could give. "What is that creature?"

"A test, my brother," he said softly. "Only a test."

"A test," I echoed. Then I said, "A test you did not fail."

After a moment, he breathed, "Aye." And again there was sorrow in his voice — sorrow for me.

"How?" I demanded. My need for knowledge was great.

"I —" he began, then fell silent. But I waited grimly for him, and after a time he brought himself to speak. "I knelt before the creature," he said, and he was whispering, "and I said, 'Work your will, demon. I do not fear you, for I love your Lady, and you cannot harm my heart.' And then the creature was gone, and I remained." But then of a sudden his voice became stronger, and he cried out, "Mardik, you must not ask these things! It is wrong of me to speak of them. It is not a kindness to you — or to the Lady. You must meet each test in your own way, else all that you endure will have no purpose."

"Do not fear, Festil my brother," I said. "I will meet that creature in my own way, be it beast or

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demon." That was a promise I made to myself and to the fear which the creature had given me. "Yet I must ask you to tell me of the other tests."

"I must not!" he protested.

"Yet I must ask," I said again. "Festil, young men are slain in that cottage, and it needs but little to make even old men follow the Lady to their graves. I cannot prevent their deaths if I cannot gain my way to speak with her."

"Is that your reason?" he asked, and now the sorrow was thick and heavy in his voice. "Is that why you will return to her?"

Then I answered openly because I could not lie to that sound in my brother's voice. "For that reason also. And for the reason of your blindness. But if I lacked such reasons, yet I would go, for I desire the Lady in White with a desire that consumes me."

Still he was silent, but I knew now that he would tell me all he could without false kindness. And at last he said softly, "There is a woman. You must find some answer to her need. And then there is a door." Beyond that he could not speak.

But it sufficed for me. The thing I feared was a multitude of those screaming creatures, but now I knew there was but one. Therefore I was confident. Surely I could satisfy one woman. And as to the door — why, one door does not daunt me. I thanked Festil for his help and left him there in the darkness and spent the night planning for the day to come.

And in the dawn I left to carry out my will. I took a satchel of food with me, for I did not mean to return to the village until I had won or lost, and if I failed a test I would perforce remain in the dell until the next day to try again. Bearing the satchel on my shoulder, I went to Leadenfoot and lead him from the stables to my smithy, where I harnessed him to my wagon. Then into the wagon I placed all that I might need — hammers, an anvil, nails, chisels, rope, a small forge of my own making, an urn of banked coals for fire, a saddle and bridle for Leadenfoot, awls, a saw, shears, tongs, an ax, wood and charcoal — everything that need or whim suggested to me. And to all this I added a pitchfork — a stout implement with tempered tines which I had made especial for a doughty farmer who broke other pitchforks the way some men break ax hafts. Then I was ready. I climbed up to the wagonbench, took the reins, released the brake, and went out through the village toward the old road and the Deep Forest.

I did not depart unnoticed, though the hour was yet early. My wagon does not roll quietly — it is well known that wheelwrights and

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blacksmiths do not tend their wagons as well as other men — and the squeal of the singletrees told all within earshot of my passing. Families came from their huts to see me go. But they did not speak, and I did not speak, and soon I was beyond them among the verges of the woods.

The Deep Forest was dim in the early light, and the noise of my wagon roused huge flocks of birds that cried out in anger at my intrusion. But I was content with their outrage. They were creatures of this dense and brooding wood, but I was not. I was Mardik the blacksmith, and I was on my way to teach the Lady in White the meaning of my desire. If the ravens of doom had come to bark about my ears, I would not have been dismayed.

Also I was patient. My wagon was slow, and Leadenfoot had no love for this work, but the pace did not dishearten me. There was a long day before me, and I did not doubt that the Lady would be waiting.

And yet in all my preparation and all my confidence, there was one thought that disquieted me. Festil my brother had gone to the dell and the cottage armed with naught but one white rose — and yet he had contrived to surpass me in the testing. "Aye, and for reward he lost his sight," I answered my doubt. It was not my intent to become another blind man.

Thus it was that I came forewarned and forearmed to the branching of the old road late in the sunlight of morning, and I took it to the grassy and beflowered dell that cupped the witch-work cottage of the Lady in White.

There I tethered Leadenfoot, allowing him to crop the grass as he chose, and set about readying myself to approach the red door. From my satchel I removed the food, storing it under the wagonbench. Then into the satchel I placed all the tools and implements that were most like to be of use — rope, hammer, chisels, awls, nails, saw, shears, tongs. With that load heavy on my shoulder, I took the pitchfork in my right hand, hefted it a time or twain to be certain of its balance. I did not delay. I am not a man who hesitates. I addressed that safe-seeming red door and knocked at it with the shaft of the pitchfork.

For the third time, it opened inward to my knock. And for the third time, I saw no one within, heard no one approach or depart.

I entered warily, alert for the creature of flame and fury. But all within that strange door was as I had seen it twice before. The stone hall stretched before me like the forecourt of an immense keep, far dwarfing the cottage that seemed to contain it. The huge logs in the

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great hearth burned brightly, and the sunlight slanted through the high windows. The pennons of the dead hung from the walls — but if they hung in derision of foolhardiness or in tribute to valor, I did not know. And there in the center of the floor stood the small gilt-work table with the silver tray.

I strode through echoes to the table warily, and when I gained it I saw on the tray the knife that I had made — my gift. Mayhap the Lady in White had declined to accept it. Or mayhap it had been left there as a sign that the way beyond the table was open for me. This also I did not know. But I did not delay to make the trial. I settled the satchel upon my shoulder and clenched the haft of the pitchfork and stepped around the table.

So I learned that my gift had not been refused, for I did not find myself without the cottage with the door locked against me. At once, my wariness grew keener. I walked on toward the arched entryway at the far end of the hall, but I walked slowly. I believe I did not breathe, so strong was my caution and my waiting.

And then it came again, the scream that rent the air and echoed in the dim hall and chilled my blood in the warmest places of my heart. A cold wind blew, and the air became full of shadows. And the creature that made the screaming came down the wide stairs from the upper levels with its broadsword upraised and its eyes aflame with murder.

I dropped my satchel, turned to face the demon.

Again it filled me with fear, and again it would have not shamed me to say that I had been unmanned. But I had found the thing of iron within me now, and I was prepared.

As the creature ran screaming across the floor toward my throat, I swung with all my strength, hurling the pitchfork like a handful of spears.

The tines bit the chest of the creature and sank deep. Such was the force of my throw that the creature was stricken backward despite its speed. Its broadsword fell in a clatter against the stone, and the creature itself lay writhing for a moment on the floor, plucking weakly at the metal in its chest. Then on an instant it seemed to me that the creature was not a demon at all, but rather a woman in a white robe. And then the creature was gone, vanished utterly, taking broadsword and pitchfork with it. I was left alone in the great hall, with the logs that no man could lift ablaze in the hearth.

"God's blood!" muttered I to myself. But swiftly I shook off the wonder. I had not come so far to be unmanned by wonder. I lifted my satchel and walked away toward

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the arched entry way, and my stride was the stride of Mardik the blacksmith, strong and sure.

But beyond the arch matters were not so certain. The entryway led to halls and chambers of great complication, and there were many passages and doors that I might choose. All were various, some spare and others sumptuous, and all had the appearance of habitation, as if the lordly people of this castle had left it only briefly and would return, but all were made of grey stone and told me nothing of the Lady in White. For a time, I wandered hither and thither, making no progress. When I came upon one of the high windows, I could see by the sun that midday was passing.

Then in vexation I stopped where I was and gave thought to my situation. I was in need of direction. But in this amazed place east and west, inward and outward, had no meaning. Therefore I must either climb or descend. And because that fell creature with the broadsword had come from the upper levels, I chose to go downward. Then at last I was able to advance, for there were many stairways, and many of them went down into the depths of this prodigious keep.

So I descended, stair beyond stair, and the air became dark about me. Torches burned in sconces in the walls to light the passages — burned, and did not appear to be consumed — but they were few and the halls were many. Therefore I took one of the torches, a brand the length of this arm, and bore it with me, and so I was able to continue my descent.

Then of a sudden I came upon a chamber bright-lit and spacious, its walls behung with rich tapestries depicting I knew not what heraldic or sorcerous legends. And there in the center stood a low couch. And there on the couch lay a woman in black.

She turned her head toward me as I entered, but at first my eyes were unaccustomed to the brightness, and I could not see her well. "Ah, man!" she hailed me, and her voice was the voice of a woman in need. "Rescuer! I beg of you — redeem me from my distress!"

"What is your need, woman?" said I, seeking to clear my sight. But I knew already the name of her need. I had heard that need often before in the voices of women. And I saw no harm in it. I was prepared to answer it, for the sake of the Lady in White and her testing.

"Ah, man!" she said to me in pleading. "I am loveless and alone. Life is a long misery, and there is no joy for me, for I am scorned and reviled everywhere. Help me, O man! For surely I can endure no more."

That had an unsavory sound to it, but still I was undaunted. I

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moved closer to her, blinking against the brightness.

But then my sight cleared, and I saw her, and she was hideous. Her raiment was not a black robe, but rather leper's rags, and her hands were gnarled and reft with leprosy. I saw them well, for she extended them toward me beseechingly. They were marked with running sores, and her arms were marked, and her face, also, was marked. Her hair hung in vile snatches from her head, and many teeth were gone from her gums, and the flesh of her face had been misshapen by illness, so that it seemed to be made all of bruises and scabs. Gazing upon her, I could not say which of them had become the greater, my loathing or my pity — for I was sickened by the sight of her, it's true; and yet the deepness of her misery wrung my heart.

But Festil had said, "You must find some answer to her need." And verily, this was a test to pale all testing of gifts and demon-creatures. Again she cried out, "Help me, O man, I beg of you! Ease my hurt." Now I knew not what answer Festil my brother had given this leprous crone, but some answer he had given, that was certain, for he had not failed this test. And I knew of no answer but one — no answer but one that could stand against this piteous and abhorrent distress. Therefore I bethought me of the Lady in White, and with her image I spurred myself until my hands ached to feel her throat between them. Then I stepped forward to stand beside the couch.

The woman's hands reached pleading for mine, but I stopped and drew the knife from my boot and thrust it through her heart with one blow of my fist.

Then on an instant it seemed to me that her face softened and her hair grew thick and bronzen and her lips became full and her rags were whitest samite. And then she was gone, vanished as utterly as the demon-creature, and there was neither knife nor couch with me in the chamber.

Then my anger came upon me again, and I vowed in my heart that the Lady in White would answer me for this. In my anger I did not delay. There was only one other doorway to this chamber. Taking up my satchel, I went out that way swiftly, hoping to come upon the Lady before she had prepared another and more foul test.

But that way led only to a lightless passage, and the passage led only to a stout wooden door that was shut. No Lady was there. And no woman, though mayhap she was as swift as a deer, could have run the length of that passage to open and close that door before I entered the passage behind her. Yet did I not doubt that I had come to the

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proper place. For there was light beyond that stout door, light shining through the edges of the lintel and the space along the floor. And across the light a figure moved within the room from time to time, casting shadows that I could see.

Therefore I did not question how the Lady in White had come to be beyond that door. Indeed it's true that in that strange place no swiftness or startlement seemed strange to me. Desire and anger burned in me like iron from the forge, and I gave no thought to matters that any sensible man might misdoubt. I went forward with the sole intent of entering the room beyond the door.

At the door I knocked, but there was no answer. I called out as courteously as I could. Still there was no answer. Soon it became clear to me that there would be no answer. The figure casting the shadows gave no heed to my presence.

At first, I was filled by a need to shout and rage, but I mastered it. Without doubt, this door was the door of which Festil had spoken — another test. A simple enough thing in itself, after the fear and loathing of the tests I had overcome. Yet for a moment I was daunted. I was unsure of my reply to this test.

My unsureness came from my belief that I knew what Festil's reply had been. No doubt he had announced himself there and then had simply set himself to wait, possessing his soul in patience until the figure within the room deigned to take notice of him. And in this cottage I had come to understand that Festil my brother was not unwise. Loon and dreamer though he was, he had within him a thing that met this testing better than I.

But I was Mardik the blacksmith, not Festil the dreamer, and after my meeting with the leprous woman there was no patience in me. I set down my satchel of tools and turned myself to a consideration of the door itself.

It was made of heavy timbers, iron bound and studded. Its hinges were set to open inward, and I could see through the crack along the lintel that it was held in place by a massive bolt which no strength of mine could break or bend. My first thought was to slip the blade of my saw through the crack to sever the bolt, but I did not, fearing that the figure within the room would not permit me to work unhindered. Therefore I turned to the hinges. And there I saw my way clear before me.

There were but two hinges, though they were of thick black iron; and they were secured, high and low in the door, each by but one heavy bolt through the wood. "Aye, verily, my fine Lady," I muttered to myself. "Does all your test-

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ing come to this?" For I was Mardik the ironmonger and knew beyond doubt that those two bolts could not stand against me.

In truth the iron of them was old beyond age, and they were no fair test for me. With chisel and hammer I sheared the head from the upper bolt in two blows. And in three the lower bolt failed before me.

Then, using the chisel, I pried the wood toward me until the door slipped from its frame. Here I had need of strength, for the timbers were heavy, but strength I had, and my chisel did not bend. And then light streamed into the passage, and the door was open.

Snatching up my satchel, I entered quickly and found myself in a large chamber like an alchemist's laboratory. Work tables stood everywhere, and on them were vials and flasks of crystal, small fires that burned without smoke, many-colored powders and medicines, and strange apparatus with a look of witchery about them. There was no source to the light that I could discover. Rather, the very air of the chamber seemed to shine.

And standing at one of the tables across the room from me was the Lady in White.

She was as radiant as my brightest rememberings, as beautiful as the heavens. Her eyes shone starlike and fathomless, and her hair flamed in bronzen glory, and the whiteness of her robe was pure beyond bearing. At the sight of her, both my desire and my anger became as nothing for a moment, so great was the spell of wonder cast on me by her loveliness.

But she regarded me with something akin to curiosity in her gaze and something akin to humor on her lips, and this regarding made her human to me. The hot iron in me awoke. I cast wonder aside and went toward the Lady in White to take her.

Yet I stopped again at once in astonishment. For at my approach the Lady turned to me and shrugged her shoulders, and with that simple gesture her white robe fell from her, and her bronzen hair fell from her, and her loveliness fell from her and was gone. In her place stood a tall man clad in grey. His shoulders were stooped and his beard long, and on his grizzled hair he wore a pointed hat such as wizards wear. Curiosity and humor were there in his face, but there also were scorn and anger.

"Very well, Mardik," he said to my astonishment. "You have won your way to me. What is your desire?"

But I could not have told him my desire. There was a hand of confusion upon me, and I could not have uttered the name of my desire, even to myself. I stared at the

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wizard like a calf and muttered the broken pieces of thoughts until at last I found the words to say, "Where is the Lady?"

"There is no Lady," he said without hesitation.

"No Lady?" said I. "No Lady?" And then a great shame came upon me, for I had shed blood for the sake of that Lady, and my anger broke from me in a roar. "Then what was the purpose?"

The wizard shrugged a shrug of scorn. "To disguise myself," he said. "I have work before me, and to work my work I have need betimes for things from the village. Therefore I disguise myself so that I will not be known for what I am. I have no wish to be prevented from my work by callow fools, importuning me for spells to make their cows fruitful and their maidens avid, enchantments to speed childbirth and fend off old age."

"Then you are a fool!" I cried, for I was full of rage. "To disguise yourself, you clothe yourself in a form that draws men here to die! — a form that no man can refuse in his desire!"

"Mayhap," said the wizard. But he gave no explanation. He turned from me as if he had no more use for me — as if he had tested me in the crucible and found me to be impure, base metal. And he said, "Nothing that your heart desires exists at all."

Thus he took the measure of my worth and discarded me.

For there was no laboratory about me and no wizard before me. I stood on grass in the dell, and the air was dim with evening, and the last light of the sun made the white walls of the cottage gleam strangely. All the windows of the cottage were dark, as if that place were no habitation for man or woman, and there was no smoke arising from the chimney.

And the Lady in White stood before me.

"Ah, Mardik," she said gently, "be comforted," and her voice was a music that made my heart cry out within me. "My magic is strait and perilous, but it is not unkind." Gently her arms came about my neck, and when her lips touched mine, all my desire and my anger melted, and I became helpless to meet or deny her kiss.

Then she was gone. The Lady in White was gone. The cottage was gone. Leadenfoot and my wagon were gone. The dell was gone. Even the branching which had brought me here from the old road was gone. The sun itself was gone, and I was left alone in the night and the Deep Forest.

Then I wandered the woods in misery for a time, reft and lorn. I was lost beyond all finding of my way, and there was no strength in me. My death was near at hand. I

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wandered among the inquiries of owls and flitted through madness like the flocking of bats and stumbled until I became an easy prey for any beast that might hunger for me. Lost there beyond help, it seemed to me that death was a good thing withal, comfortable and a relief from pain.

Yet when I sought the ground and slept for a time and thought to die, I did not die. I was roused by hands upon my shoulders; and when I looked up in the moonlight, I saw blind Festil my brother bending over me.

"Mardik," he said, "my brother," and there was weeping in his voice.

"Festil," I said. "Ah, how did you find me?"

"I followed the trail of your need, my brother," said Festil. "I have traveled this way before you and know it well."

Then weeping came upon me also, and I said, "My brother, I have failed you. For the wizard asked me to name my desire, and I did not ask him to restore your sight."

"Ah, Mardik!" he said, and now I heard laughter and joy through his sorrow. "Do you truly not understand the reason for my blindness? My brother, it is a thing of choice for me and in no way ill. For I also was asked to name my desire, and to this I gave answer: 'It is my desire to gaze solely upon the Lady in White to the end of my days, adoring her beauty.' That desire was granted to me. For her image is always before me, and my eyes behold no other thing."

Then my heart wept. Ah, Festil my brother! You are a loon and a dreamer, and you are a wiser man than I. But I did not speak aloud. I arose from the ground, and mad Festil took my arm and guided me despite his blindness and brought me without mishap to the old road. There I found Leadenfoot awaiting me in patience or stupidity, and my wagon with him. Together Festil and I climbed up to the wagon-bench, and I released the brake and took the reins in my hands, and together we made our way out of the Deep Forest.

From that day to this, I have seen no evidence of magic and have had no need of it. I am Mardik the blacksmith, and I stand as tall as any man in the village, though it's true some muttered darkly about me for a time until I silenced them. I do what I will, and none can say me nay. For my sake they treat mad Festil with respect.

And yet I am not what I was. There is a lack in me that ale cannot quench and work and women cannot fill. For I have failed the testing of the Lady in White in my way, and that is a failure not to

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be forgotten or redeemed. There was a thing that I needed, and it was not in me.

The Lady in White, I say, though I do not expect to be believed. I have thought long and painfully of all that has befallen me and have concluded that the wizard was like the demon-creature and the leprous crone — another test. By means of testing, the Lady in White sought to winnow men, seeking one worthy of her love. This I believe, though Festil gives it no answer but his smile and his joy. Well, smile, then, Festil my brother. You have won your heart's desire, though it has made you blind. But I failed the tests of the Lady. Verily, I failed them all, and knew it not. But this, also, I do not utter aloud.

In truth, we do not speak much of the matter. Betimes Pendit the son of Pandeler comes to our hut in the evening, and we three who have endured the ordeal of the cottage sit together in the darkness, where Festil's eyes are as good as any, and better than most. But we do not speak of what we have endured. Rather Festil spins dreams for us in the night, and we share them as best we may, loving him because he sees the thing that we do not.

Her old pot I keep in the name of remembrance, though without mending, it is of little use.

There are some who say that we have been blighted, that we have become old and withered of soul before our time. But we are not blighted, Festil and I. For he has gained his heart's desire, and I — why, I am Mardik the blacksmith, wheelwright and ironmonger, and despite all my failures I have been given a gift worthy of treasuring, for I have been kissed by the Lady in White.

INSTITUTE ON THE TEACHING OF SF

The University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas will be the scene of The Intensive English Institute on The Teaching of Science Fiction, July 10-28, 1978. The Institute provides "a background in the history and literary aspects of science fiction upon which teachers can build a course or a foundation for further study." For further information contact: James Gunn, English Department, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas 66045.

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Dulan Barber is 38, a full-time freelance writer who teaches creative writing part-time at Morley College, London. He has published ten books, including non-fiction concerned with social problems and, as David Fletcher, six thrillers, three of which (A Lovable Man, A Respectable Woman *and* Raffles) *have been published in the U. S. He tells us that "Cuckoo" is only the second short story he has ever written. We think you will join us in looking for others.*

Cuckoo

by DULAN BARBER

The world was a blare of light and cold and pain. He swung upside down, his face screwed up against the smells. The blow startled him. He opened his mouth and bawled. Francesca heard him through the blur in her head which was pain and tiredness and the effects of the gas. She heard him and even understood when the masked nurse said that it was a boy. The contractions though, seemed to go on and on, and she could only nod her head weakly in acknowledgment.

Robert reached across the counterpane and took Francesca's hand.

"All right now?"

She gripped his hand, swallowed hard and nodded.

"They'll ... they'll bring him in a minute," she said.

He squeezed her fingers. She looked tired, still pale and thin, but that was only to be expected. A difficult pregnancy had resulted in a long and arduous labor. She told him that it had felt as though her contractions went on long after the baby was delivered.

"Poor darling, but it's all over now. You'll soon be home," he promised, leaning to kiss her cheek. "I'm so proud of you." She blushed a little and held on to his hand tightly.

"I'm so happy now," she said.

He had been right all along. Francesca leaned back and felt as though an amazing weight had been lifted from her spirit. She felt ashamed now. She had behaved like an hysterical schoolgirl, not a mother-to-be, and Robert had put up with it all.

Nurse Tetley wheeled the baby down the ward. Daffodils blazed at the foot of the bed. Smiling gladly,

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Francesca extended her thin arms to take him. He was perfect in every detail. Robert smiled at her, then at the baby. For the first time in such a long time, she felt really close to Robert. The feeling persisted long after he had gone off to wet the baby's head with Simon. She felt as though she was floating, and it was such a comfortable feeling. She had so wanted to be pregnant, and now that she had the baby she regretted having wasted those precious nine months. She seemed destined never to enjoy her pregnancies. The first, before she and Robert had married, had been beset by fear and tension. It had taken all her courage to tell him, and she had felt defeated, not by his arguments, but because they were so predictable. Robert had said that proved they were sensible arguments and that he was only telling her what she already knew to be true. She had nodded and agreed. The last thing she wanted was to appear to be blackmailing him or to turn into a weepy sort of woman.

She was still surprised that Robert wanted her at all. Beside him, she seemed dull and lacking in enterprise. There was nothing much she wanted to do except marry and have babies. Robert said that suited him, that was exactly the sort of wife he wanted. Robert had enough get-up-and-go for both of them.

At that time, he had just gone into partnership with Simon. They were building up the business and money was tight. Their marriage, Robert's and Francesca's, and the house they were to live in, was all part of it. Robert was negotiating for three cottages which he planned to convert. When it was finished, the house would be an advertisement for what he and Simon could do. They had planned a big white wedding, and she thought he was only joking when he said that it would be a good advertisement too. It had been though, and by then she had almost forgotten about the abortion. Simon was best man. There were photographs in the local papers and the glossy county magazine. Robert was a "rising young architect" and their house was frequently mentioned. Some months later, the same magazine had run a special feature on the house. There was a photograph of Francesca, curled up on the settee, smiling. She had felt a fool when she had to admit to the girl doing the interview that she had not even chosen the furniture. Simon had taken care of all the interior decoration.

Much later, during her second and successful pregnancy, Dr. Pellegrini had asked her if she resented Robert, if she blamed him for the abortion, if she felt that her maternal and womanly instincts had been sacrificed to Robert's career.

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Even if she had felt that — and she honestly didn't think she had because she always felt so lucky to be with Robert at all — it would have been ridiculous to say so. She was pregnant again. She was going to be a mother. Perhaps Robert's priorities had not been hers, but it was definitely her turn now. No, she told Dr. Pellegrini, she didn't feel any of those things. She loved Robert. She was proud of what he had achieved. She wanted to have his child.

That was what was driving her mad. The fact — no, the possibility — that it wasn't his child.

She had waited eighteen months. She had become depressed. There was nothing for her to do all day. She kept the house clean. She went out for long walks. She cooked complicated meals for Robert. She was lonely. She began to wish that, like Simon, they lived in town. She had only ever wanted to live in the country because she thought it would be super for the children. She began to think that she would never, ever, become pregnant. She thought that perhaps the abortion had damaged her in some way. At last she had told Robert of her fears, and he had arranged at once for her to see a consultant gynecologist. There was nothing at all wrong with her, except that she was run-down, bored, and therefore depressed.

But she had felt better after that. The house seemed perfect for children. It would happen. She knew it would. She would not be lonely any more.

That night, when she woke up to find Robert moving on top of her, she had known that it would happen. She had drawn her legs up higher and moved eagerly against him, knowing that she was going to conceive. Then something had seemed wrong. A sort of panic made her body go tense and resisting. It was his smell. He didn't smell like Robert. She spoke his name, put her hands up to touch his head, and the hair felt coarse and rough to her fingers. Robert's hair was very soft, like a baby's. But it had been too late by then. Her body, his body, could not be denied. She cried out, clung to him. Afterwards she must have slept at once, forgetting everything except the marvelous certainty that she was already pregnant.

Robert was asleep beside her when she woke. He couldn't remember what time he had got home. From what he told her it was obvious that it had been very late and that he had drunk a great deal with the client he had taken to dinner. So much that he didn't even remember making love to her. In fact, he swore that he had simply fallen into bed and slept at once.

Had that hurt her, Dr. Pelle-

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grini had wanted to know? She supposed so. Sort of. It had been so good for her, but probably only because she knew, she was so certain, that she was going to conceive. And she had. Probably she wouldn't have thought any more about it if it hadn't happened again. And again. The very next day for example. She had gone to lie down in the afternoon. It was a superstitious act based, she freely admitted, on her certainty that she had conceived and the remnants of her fear about the abortion.

It had happened again. The same smell. The same urgency. The same coarse, almost bristly hair. When she awoke, she was alone, of course, but her clothes were disarrayed and she felt ashamed. It went on for a month, and in that time she learned nothing more about him, what she had to think of as "him." Often she was too tired, too sated, to make love with Robert, and when he pressed her she confessed that she thought she was pregnant. She no longer took naps, though her body cried out for sleep. She was afraid to sleep without Robert beside her. When she resisted in this way, she felt a terrible frustration, a sort of longing. It was not her frustration, not her longing. It was something outside her that seemed to fill the house. She walked further and for longer. Outside the house she felt safe. When Robert had to go away for a weekend, to visit a rich client who was planning an office block in the district, she had begged to go with him. He wouldn't hear of it. It wasn't that sort of weekend. She had had to give in again. All weekend. She couldn't bring herself to recall it, not even for Dr. Pellegrini. And when Robert returned she was certain, and he drove her to the doctor who confirmed that she was indeed pregnant.

She should have been pleased. She *was* pleased. Then Robert said, "But when? When could it have happened?"

He still insisted that he had not touched her that night, and she knew that it had been that night. The dreams, or whatever they were, ceased the moment she was certain. It seemed to her that the whole house relaxed. The very timbers seemed to sigh with relief.

It was a difficult pregnancy. Most of the time she felt dreadful. She could not put on any weight. She was sick all the time and felt listless. She looked awful and wept a great deal. The doctor thought that she might be carrying twins, and she had gone into the hospital for tests and observation. Robert had been really worried then, and she had told him what was really wrong with her, what she was afraid of. He had found Dr. Pellegrini and insisted that she see him.

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Dr. Pellegrini was very fatherly and told her that all her physical symptoms were the result of her psychological state. She had been morbidly afraid of barrenness. She wished to punish herself for the abortion she regretted. Erotic dreams such as she had described to him were not uncommon in women who doubted their biological capabilities. There had been no rape, no intruder, had there? She didn't believe the house was haunted, did she? Well, then, everything was fine. It was Robert's baby and the pregnancy would come to term. She must rest, take care of herself and, above all, not worry.

Robert had seen him as well and afterwards had told her that the doctor had been equally reassuring to him. He thought perhaps the house was getting her down. Perhaps it was too large and too remote? Would she like to stay with her mother until the baby was born? Robert wouldn't mind. He only wanted her to be well and happy. But she hadn't wanted to leave. She knew what the house meant to Robert, and she felt that she had already caused enough trouble. He was very understanding about her fear of sex, too. He had been patient and kind. He'd even make jokes about her "other man," and Francesca had tried to laugh at them.

And all the time he had been right. He and Dr. Pellegrini. She had carried her baby to the full term. He was a healthy baby. In the morning she would see him. Francesca smiled as she fell asleep.

Robert, of course, had never taken any of it seriously, but he had been worried. He admitted as much to Simon later that evening as they celebrated. The wine loosened his tongue, and Simon, who enjoyed gossip, especially marital gossip, made a good listener. Robert had blamed himself about the abortion, the root of all Fran's difficulties. He'd often thought in the last nine months that he had been wrong, perhaps, to insist on it. But so much had been at stake, and babies cost, didn't they? Besides, it wasn't just the business. He hadn't realy been sure then. Well, yes, he was sure — after all, he was engaged to Fran — but not quite ready. He'd enjoyed planning the house, the big wedding. He really didn't want to see all that thrown away just because Fran had slipped up. Simon assured him that he had been right. Didn't the fact that he was a proud father now prove it?

She was very sensitive, Fran. That was the real trouble. And she'd had too much time to brood. OK, so the house was a bit remote, but she'd always wanted a place in the country, precisely because it was better for children. Simon, who

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much preferred his flat in town, agreed that Francesca was right, that it must have been the waiting that had got her down. And, no, no, you could never please a woman. Not one hundred percent. Didn't he have an expensive ex-wife to prove it?

Robert reached that stage of drunkenness when he was convinced that only Simon in the whole wide world understood him. Simon smiled and accepted more wine. As for the idea that there had been some phantom lover, well, he agreed that that was stupid beyond measure. And he understood why Robert had been so alarmed.

"I thought she was going potty on me," Robert said, slurring his words and staring intently into his glass. "She really put the wind up me. I mean, how could she know it was that night and not some other? Women get these daft ideas in their heads. No basis in fact. No logic. That's the trouble. Still, old Dr. Pellegrini soon sorted her out. He said to me, you know, he said that though physically women go off it when they're pregnant or upset or something, the libido can stay active. Specially in a very sensitive girl like Fran. And she is sensitive, you know. Very. She's too sensitive really. For her own good."

Simon agreed. He had always thought Francesca sensitive. And dreary.

"But you're just as bad," he said, teasing Robert. "I mean, fancy getting so smashed you don't even remember having it away. That's going too far, my boy. And, anyway, you could have agreed with her, if she was so set on it."

"Oh, no, no, you're definitely wrong there." Robert wagged his finger in weighty remonstrance. "I didn't get that smashed. I didn't do it and I couldn't tell her that I did. That much I do know."

"Oh?" Simon raised his eyebrows. "Why?"

Robert could see two of him. He giggled. "Because I didn't have dinner with a client that evening, and I didn't have much to drink. When did I ever have dinner with a client without you? We're partners. Old mates and partners, aren't we?"

"Indeed we are," Simon agreed. "So what were you doing?"

"Rosie." Robert laughed uproariously, his limbs flailing like a puppet's.

"You mean Rosie with the big... the one who made such a cock-up of the filing?"

Robert nodded his head wildly.

"I don't believe you."

"Scout's honor. God's own truth. Never had such a time in my life. There's no way I could've ... not then. Not with Fran. Besides, I hadn't been home five minutes when she woke up. I thought she'd

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caught me, but she must've been sleeping like a log."

"I see." Simon placed a hand over his glass. He had to drive home. It was getting late. Robert helped himself to more.

"And what about Rosie now?"

"All over. Of course." Robert giggled again. "Or will be tomorrow. These last few months she's been ... very accommodating. But it's all going to stop. Now the baby's here. You see before you, my dear old mate and partner, a model husband and father. And I am the father, even though it wasn't that night."

Simon was prepared to believe him. He offered to help Robert upstairs, but Robert said he was going to kip down on the settee and keep watch for the ghost that had ravished his wife and never used deodorant. He was still laughing when Simon let himself out.

Francesca was upset that she could not feed the baby. She had very little milk and giving suck exhausted her. Everyone was very reassuring, especially Robert. He brought more flowers and held her. He said he was glad. Breast feeding would play havoc with her figure, and he liked her, wanted her just the way she was. She told him that she loved him. The baby began to gain weight the moment they put him on the bottle. She would soon be able to go home.

Francesca's baby was not popular. He cried and cried, except when he was in her arms. His crying set all the other babies off. Francesca would have been happy to hold him all the time, but the nurses insisted on their routine.

"You mustn't let him become a mummy's boy," they said. "You mustn't give in. You'll have a lot to do when you get home. You must start him as you mean to go on."

Francesca nodded. Secretly, she was thrilled by the baby's demanding dependence on her. She would give in to him. She owed him that for all the crazy things she had thought while she was carrying him. Perhaps some of them had communicated to him, made him insecure? The nurses said she would have to watch him very carefully, too. He had this silly habit of scrunching himself up at the side of the crib, and it might be dangerous. Francesca assured them that she would watch him at all times, and then they lectured her again about starting as she meant to go on.

At first it was easy. Robert took a few days off to be with her while she established that routine they all said was so important. They decided to call him Oliver. He went to Robert without any fuss and often fell asleep in his arms. Then they would put him down for a while. He

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would invariably wake up with a start, screaming. It seemed to get worse when Robert went back to work. Oliver hardly ever slept, and Francesca got behind with everything. Once she had gone running to him and found his crib shaking, yet when she reached it, he seemed to be quite still. He was flattened against the side, his little arms thrust out as though he was trying to push something out. It took her a long time to soothe him, and she had not begun dinner by the time Robert came home. He slept that night though, through sheer exhaustion, yet often his violent movements, his restlessness, woke Francesca. She peered down into his crib and felt that, though he slept, he was not peaceful. She was certain that something troubled him, but when she told Robert he just said she was being neurotic.

"How's fatherhood?" Simon asked. It was unusual for Robert to be in the pub in the evening.

"Frankly, bloody awful."

Simon had expected as much. He listened to Robert's tale of woes. Francesca simply wasn't coping. The place was littered with diapers and bottles, rattles and teething rings. They lived on tasteless convenience foods, which Robert usually had to prepare. And they never got any proper sleep. It wasn't really the baby's fault. It was Francesca, getting up every five minutes to see if he was all right.

"It's bound to take a while," Simon said. "It's a big adjustment to make."

He had assiduously avoided babies for these very reasons. He persuaded Robert to go home. He found the conversation depressing.

When Robert arrived home, Francesca was hysterical. The house, his beautiful house, stank of babies. She walked up and down, clutching Oliver and weeping. She had discovered bruises on his legs and arms when she bathed him that morning. She had telephoned the doctor, who had been less than helpful. She had wanted him to come at once, but he had said there was no need. The district nurse would be looking in the next day, and if she was still worried, in a few days....

"Of course it's because we live out here. He doesn't want to make house calls out here. It's all the fault of this bloody house. He even said perhaps I handled Oliver too roughly."

Robert took the baby from her, looked at the little bruises.

"Considering how he throws himself about in that crib, what can you expect?" he said.

"That's not natural. He shouldn't be doing that at all."

"Nonsense. He's just a great big

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active boy, aren't you, Olly?"

"That's not all," Francesca wailed. "When I finally got him settled this afternoon, he suddenly let out this terrible scream. I thought he was dying, and when I got to him, his diaper pin was sticking in his tummy, like a little dagger. Look!" She pulled the baby's nightgown up to show the puncture mark, with its scab of blood. Robert was afraid.

"They come undone sometimes, especially when a baby's as active as he is. You'll just have to be more careful..."

"I am careful. I knew you'd say that. That pin was quite safely fastened when I put him down..."

"All right, all right." Robert's head ached. "I'll put him down and then..."

"No. No. Give him to me."

"Don't be silly, Fran. You've got to get some rest. We've got to talk. I'll see to him."

She began to cry hopelessly as he carried Oliver upstairs. The baby stirred in his arms and seemed to stiffen as he lowered him gently into the crib. He began to wail before Robert reached the foot of the stairs. He had to restrain Francesca physically to prevent her going to him. He tried to explain that she was overwrought, exhausted. Somehow, he managed to calm her sufficiently to make her take two sleeping pills. When he finally got her into bed, Oliver seemed to have worn himself out. He was pushed up against the side of the crib, grizzling. Robert knew that he was too tired to be disturbed by that pitiful sound. He wondered, with a sick feeling, if Fran was capable of looking after the baby. Soon, he was fast asleep beside her.

The other baby had always been there, always, ever since Oliver could remember. As he had slowly learned to recognize the blobs of faces hanging over his crib, the supporting arms that held him, the hands that played with him, he had been surprised that nobody ever picked the other baby up. Nobody ever did anything for the other baby. In the hospital it hadn't been too bad, but the other baby got bigger and bigger. The other baby was stronger than Oliver. There was never sufficient room for him in the crib. The other baby pushed him to the side so that he always had to lie awkwardly and his limbs ached. It got worse each day since they left the hospital. The other baby got even bigger. It snatched all his toys and threw them out of the crib. It punched and pinched him. It threatened him the whole time. Oliver was terrified of the other baby. He was exhausted by the effort of protecting himself. The other baby wouldn't let him sleep. When they gave him a sweet drink

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in a bottle, propped against the pillow beside him, the other baby snatched it away. The last time he had slept, the other baby had got the pin out of his diaper and stabbed it into him.

They never took any pictures of the other baby. That was why the other baby was so mean. He tried to tell them about the other baby. He couldn't understand why they didn't see the other baby. The other baby was killing him.

Oliver lay in quiet, exhausted misery. He could hear the heavy breathing of the people in the big bed. His back hurt where the other baby was kicking him. He was too tired to resist any more, too tired even to cry. It became difficult to breathe. The other baby seemed to be lying on him, on his chest and on his face. His face was forced into something soft and cloying, and he heard the other baby chuckle contentedly. He couldn't, couldn't raise himself up. The other baby pressed down on him so that he couldn't breathe.

"She blames me, you see," Robert said. He looked dreadful, like a ghost of his former self. Simon didn't know what to say. "She won't have me in the house. Can I stay here? Perhaps after the funeral..."

Simon fetched him a drink and watched him weep as he explained how Francesca had found Oliver, lying quite peacefully in his crib, dead.

"If I hadn't insisted that she take those sleeping pills. She always hated taking them. If I hadn't been so tired, hadn't been drinking... oh Christ, Simon, what am I going to do? She'll never, ever, forgive me."

"What ... caused it?"

Robert shook his head wearily, as though this was an irrelevant question.

"They just call it crib death."

There had been a time, early in her pregnancy, when even the doctors had thought she might be carrying twins. After the funeral, standing in her black, in the bedroom, Francesca remembered that. She wished now that it had been true. If she had had two babies, then she would not now be so bereft. Tears ran down her face. She stared out of the window, unable to see through the blur of her tears. Why couldn't Oliver have been twins? At the delivery, drugged and pained, she had thought she had borne two babies. The contractions seemed to go on after Oliver was born, and she had fancied a second, final expulsion. It had all been a trick of her mind because everything was made indistinct by the tiredness and gas.

Yet, as the days went by and she lived alone in the house, it did not

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seem that she had lost her baby entirely. Perhaps she became reconciled to it, now that she was able to rest. Sometimes she thought she saw the crib shake with a baby's kicking. She was always having to pick up the rattle which she placed carefully back on the cover. She began to dream of the man again. She slept a great deal, often in the daytime, and he would come to her. Now he did not make love but sat beside her, comforting her. He held her hand and seemed to be urging her to do something. There was something important he wanted her to do. She was glad of the dreams and felt comforted by them, except that they left her increasingly with this feeling that there was something she had to do.

She woke up one dusk, alarmed. Half asleep, half awake, she hurried to the bedroom. The crib was shaking. She laid her hand on the side, to steady it. Her foot kicked the rattle across the room. She smiled, spoke into the crib; and when Robert arrived that evening, he found her sitting on the settee, murmuring and offering her left breast to the empty crook of her arm.

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SEE LOGAN RUN & RUN & RUN & RUN & RUN & RUN . . .

...and run... and run... and run... and run...

It was one of those Friday nights.

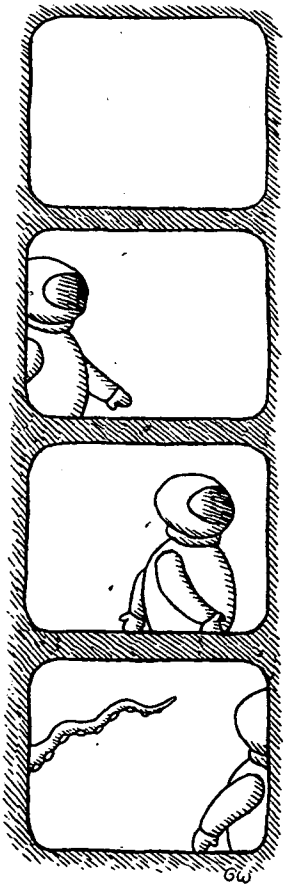
I had to work until 8:30 (No, I am not on the Rex Reed level of reviewers who get a comfortable screening well in advance of their deadline.) This meant that I would miss at least a half hour of *The Making of Star Wars,* not to mention the season's opener of *Wonder Woman.* But I would be in time for the 9:30 premiere of the television version of *Logan's Run,* which was the most potentially important of the lot.

(I must break down and admit that I have a sort of eternal idiot optimism about new films and TV shows which, as the steady reader of this column knows, is not all that often justified.)

I was also not that concerned about the other two because, apropos the Star Wars "documentary," I (1) am not that interested in the technical "how" of things so much as the stylistic "how" — in fact, I would rather keep my illusions intact; (2) find that most of these pop documentaries are usually short on information and long on promotion; and (3) am at this point sick to death of all the Star Wars *stuff.*

BAIRD SEARLES

Films and Television



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Much as I loved the film, my allegiance is being sorely tried by the exploitation spinoffs, which remind me anew to fervently hope that nothing I really like becomes too popular.

And, apropos WW, I had heard that she was being updated to the 1970s, and since so far as I was concerned, much of the charm of the show derived from its '40s ambience, I didn't have much hope for a revelation in that direction, either.

Anyhow, back to Friday evening. I slid into home in time for the last half hour of the *Star Wars* thing, and it proved to be much as I had expected, though it was nice to see C-3PO and R2-D2 again (they hosted the show). It's interesting that the idols of the film have turned out to be those two, or Darth Vader, *not* Obi-Wan Kenobi. Apparently our culture is more impressed by cuteness or menace than by heroic goodness.

On to the last half hour of *Wonder Woman,* while waiting for the pizza to be delivered (you're getting a good look at the squalid life of a critic in this piece). Indeed, it was as I feared; the '70s do not become Wonder Woman. Just another pretty face chasing watered down James Bond type villains (one of whom had a robot that fenced and resembled — you guessed it — Darth Vader with a silver color scheme instead of black).

I will still, however, defend to the death Lynda Carter, for the charm of her acting and her ability to fill that overwrought metal brassiere.

Now the pizza had arrived and it was time for the main event.

Well, it's lucky it was a good pizza.

I think the thing that offended me most about *Logan's Run* (the TV version, I must continue to make clear) was that for the most part, it looked like — and *was* — just another dreary chase filmed in those dreary California hills, and indistinguishable from *Planet of the Apes* or all those vapid Roddenberry pilots about looking for Pax (*Genesis II,* etc.) or *Charlie's Angels,* for God's sake.

The "hour-and-a-half" pilot was obviously three half hour episodes stitched together, the first of which covered the ground we've been over before in the film (and with some scenes from the film stitched in). Logan and Jessica escape from the City of Domes where everyone is eliminated at age 30 to keep the population stable. They are looking for a legendary place called Sanctuary, where people over 30 can live (have they tried St. Petersburg, Fla., I wonder?).

A new twist is brought in here to sustain (if that's the word) the series. There *are* old folk back in the city (the old folks at home, they

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call them); they are, in fact, a secret cadre that rule the place, and they promise a Sandman (a sort of dog catcher for humans) that if he gets Logan and Jessica back, he too can have the privilege of getting old and wrinkled.

And the chase is on!

L & J have discovered a sort of armored tank crossed with a Studebaker left over from the old days (a little anticipation of Damnation Alley here). And we know for a fact that they will keep coming across these endless settlements, each of which will have some new sort of strange culture. Right off the bat, we run into some pacifist types who live in an old bomb shelter and are oppressed by mean men who wear costumes just like — you'll never guess! — Darth Vader's.

Here we are introduced to a dear little girl pacifist who does everything but sing "On the Good Ship Lollypop" and lisps "I wuv oo" to Jessica as they take off (having made everything OK, of course).

Next stop — a jazzy looking town perched on a hill where all the people are — surprise! — robots, who insist on their staying so the poor things can have someone to serve. They escape with the help of a nice robot repairman (that means he repairs robots, but he also *is* a robot, but "Call me an android" he snaps). They are obviously going to be stuck with him for the rest of the trip.

All I can say is that I hope they find Sanctuary very, *very* soon.

All this, by the way, must be most confusing to the uninitiated who saw the *film* version which hit TV just the week before, in which of course, L & J go back and blow up the dome. (The movie on TV was touted the week before that by commercials that emphasized its resemblance to *Star Wars* — by which was meant presumably that they were both science fiction — and the appearance in the cast of Farrah Fawcett - What's - his - name, said appearance lasting for about 3½ minutes, as I remember.)

A word for the Spiderman TV-movie special that wasn't all that special except for the special effects, which really were special (Spidie crawling up and down the sides of buildings, etc.).

Things-to-come-dept.... George Pal (responsible for *The Time Machine, War of the Worlds* and many others) has three projects in the works: Philip Wylie's *The Disappearance,* Wells' *In the Days of the Comet* (maybe as a TV miniseries), and something called *The Voyage of the Berg,* about an iceberg towed from Antarctica to Australia.

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Something a bit different from Ron Goulart, concerning the very odd happenings at Cleveland Pop College, the fifteenth stop on the Lectric Jack & Company nostalgia tour.

Lectric Jack

by RON GOULART

They could never get him to tell why he did it to Lectric Jack.

He wouldn't even tell me why he bashed the little fellow's head against the dressing room wall, tore him to pieces and tossed the pieces around.

Because of the other thing Pete Warriner had done that same night and in that same room, nobody bothered much about Lectric Jack. They gathered him up, dumped him in his box and concentrated on other things. From what I've been able to find out since, it was all the noise Pete made while destroying the little robot which prompted the college auditorium people to call in the police.

The college was Cleveland Pop, the fifteenth stop on the Lectric Jack & Company tour. Pete had been uneasy since midway through the first performance on the first stop, which had been at Jr. Princeton.

He told me about his feelings when we met for lunch in the Ruins of Manhattan Sandwich Shop just before he took off for stop number six at Harvard Open.

Kablam!

Some kids had been hopping around on the skeleton of the Empire State Building, up around the 35th floor, and a good half of the building came toppling down right across the street from the tent restaurant we were lunching in.

"Everything's going blooey," said Pete. He was a tall, thin man of thirty. Dressed conservatively, as usual, in a one-piece daysuit, he'd gone along with the hair dyeing fad only to the extent of a blond spot at each temple.

"Manhattan fell apart a long time ago," I said. "It's not symbolic of anything when pieces keep crumbling away."

"Do you realize what year this is?"

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"Isn't it still 2003?"

"That's what I mean." Pete paused when the robot waiter brought him his neoham on mock-rye.

Creak! Squeek!

"See, even the robots are going blooey," said Pete.

The silver-toned waiter leaned close, creaking again. "I'm not actually a robot, sir," he explained in a low voice. "I'm an out-of-work actor, trying to pass. Don't complain or —"

"Okay, okay," said Pete. Then he stared up at the man. "How come you creak then?"

"It's my false leg, sir. I'm a veteran of the Angola campaign of '89." He bowed, creaked, hurried away through the crowded tent.

"Actors," said Pete. "Old actors. Nostalgia. Everybody's living in the wrong time, yearning for something defunct."

"Why so gloomy?"

"I'm in love." Pete studied his sandwich for a moment.

Across the street more of the Empire State came booming down.

I asked, "Someone you met on the tour?"

"Unfortunately, yes. Ever hear of Nitty Bender?"

"The girl who wrote *I Sleep with the Stars, I Screw the Celebrities, I Hop in the Sack with the Great and the Near Great, I Get Banged by* —"

"That Nitty Bender, yeah," said Pete. "I'm sleeping with her."

"I figured as much."

"Yeah, that's the trouble," he said after a mournful bite at his sandwich. "In order to do the kind of newsdisc and bookspool stories she's noted for, Nitty has to ... well, that's only one of the problems. There's also Rachel."

"You're marriage contract with Rachel expired nearly a year ago, didn't it?"

"Rachel wants to renew," said Pete. He slapped his sandwich down on his plate and began to cut it in half and then in quarters. "A year of marriage to Rachel was ... sufficient. When we were married she was so damn possessive, insisted on coming along on all the Yesterday, Inc., tours I was traveling with. Once when I was pushing Ringo Starr's wheelchair along a pedramp, she ... anyway, Rachel is back in my life."

"How's the tour with lectric Jack going?" I'd never actually known Rachel Fleer. Pete met her at a Vegetarian Party rally in the Fairfield Preserve in Connecticut about two or three years after he had worked with me at Oldies, Ltd. I'd seen her image fairly often, since whenever I had lunch with Pete during the year his marriage ran, Rachel would frequently make pixphone calls to our table. She really was quite possessive, maybe

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because she loved Pete in her own somewhat quirky way. We'd talked about Rachel a lot during that period, about what a mistake Pete felt he'd made. Once he'd decided not to renew, our conversations became much more pleasant. I do think Pete probably resented, though he never said anything directly, my successful series of 2- and 5-year marriage contracts with Hulda. "Lectric Jack's been grossing very well according to *Daily Nostalgia.*"

"That little mechanical prick." Pete cut each of the sandwich quarters in half. "How could kids ever have liked him? What a foul little shit he is. 'Jack is back!' When I was a kid —"

"The kids who grew up in the late '80s were different," I reminded him. "There was the Brazil War, the Angola troubles, the plague which wiped out the Dakotas... a lot of tension in the air."

"Every generation's got tension, doesn't mean you have to look back fondly on a little mechanical prick like Lectric Jack." He began consuming, chomping, the tiny chunks of sandwich. "And Uncle Charlie. Jesus, the pair of them."

"Something really wrong with Uncle Charlie? We were thinking of using him over at Old Stuff, and I remember hearing something about pills."

"Ha. Pills," said Pete. "Pills is only the appetizer. Then he sticks his head in a Box."

"Getting gaga in his old age, is he?"

"A Box, capital B. Don't you know what a Box is?"

"Hulda's always chiding me about living too much in the past and not keeping up with my own era. Seems to me I heard something about show people out in Post Quake LA using a sort of —"

"It's a Brainstim Box. You stick your stupid head in it, hook up the wires to your brain and ... wham! Synthetic ecstasy."

"Does it interfere with Uncle Charlie's going on?"

"After an hour of synthetic ecstasy the old bastard is in no mood to sit in front of an audience of louts with Lectric Jack on his knee," said Pete, grinding up the last bit of sandwich with his teeth. "College kids today. We were at Miami Comic Art University two nights ago and ... well, it's not like ... but what is? And Rachel keeps appearing all over the place."

"Rachel? In person?"

"No, no, she's using some kind of teloptic projection. Usually we don't get all of her. Sometimes it's from the waist down only, once we got only her head and this much of her neck. 'Give me another chance, dearest.' That sort of crap. The other night after the second show at Yale Movie Buff College, she ap-

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peared smack in the middle of Nitty's bedroom at the Bulldog Skycar Lodge. I'd just tossed Rance Keane out of ... you know, the gunfighter?"

"He grossed $113,000 last week in Pittsburgh."

"He also had time to try to climb into the sack with Nitty." Pete glared around the tent. "Did my sandwich come?"

"Yep."

"Did I eat it?"

"You did."

"It's that little mechanical prick who's giving me most of the grief."

"You mean, it's Uncle Charlie," I said. "As I understand, Lectric Jack is a very simple computerized dummy robot. Uncle Charlie has to push the buttons on the control panel concealed in the little fellow's back to make him function. So even though he has a wide range of physical and vocal responses, it's really Uncle Charlie who —"

"That's some splendid wide range. Schmuck, schlub, schtoop," said Pete. "That's all Lectric Jack ever calls me, plus an occasional putz. Did you know Rance Keane keeps his gunbelt on even in bed? Ever seen a nude gunfighter wearing only his gunbelt? Very unsettling it can be."

"We took the stuffed John Wayne on tour last year," I said. "I never had anything to do with dressing him. We did very well in Florida and California. Grossed $216,000 in four days in the Frisco Enclave. Lot of old people there remember —"

"Listen how many times you say we. It's as though you really feel you're part of Old Stuff. Jesus, if you fell over dead tomorrow, they sure as hell wouldn't stuff you."

Hulda's pointed out this same flaw in me. I do identify with whatever outfit I'm working for. Seems to keep me from becoming as upset as Pete, even though it does make Hulda wonder about my character. "You're right," I admitted.

"And don't think that little mechanical prick is so stupid," said Pete. "I've seen Uncle Charlie go on a couple times when he was so ecstatic he couldn't punch his own belly button, let along all that crap in Lectric Jack's rear end. It didn't spoil the show any."

"They didn't have any robots sophisticated enough to do their own talking and thinking back in the 1980s, Pete. Far as I know, Lectric Jack's never been augmented, he's exactly as he was back then. It has to be Uncle Charlie who makes him do what he does."

"Did I ever tell you about the time I found Kamiyui in the bathpit?"

"The air diet philosopher from Japan?"

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"That very Kamiyui, sitting motherass naked in the bathpit in Nitty's suite at the Rollerdrome Inn in Miami," Pete said. "She can't interview anybody without getting him undressed, even a holy man."

"Why in the bathpit?"

"Oh, Rachel had been materializing in the vicinity of the bed area all afternoon."

"Isn't that, by the way, illegal?"

"Screwing a Japanese holy man in a tub?"

"No, what Rachel's doing. Isn't it invasion of privacy?"

"Don't you keep up with what the Supreme Court Computer decides? Intrusion by electric image is perfectly legal in matters of the heart. That's been the law since 2000, as a result of the Steinbrunner vs. Downtown Muffler Shop case. You ought to keep —"

"Maybe, Pete," I suggested, "you ought to forget about Nitty Bender. You're one of these guys who —"

"I don't need advice," he said. "You sure I ate my sandwich?"

"While I watched."

"Still hungry. Where's our spurious robot waiter?" His head ticked from side to side. "I'm in love with Nitty, it consumes me, it's like —"

"As I recall, you used to be pretty enthusiastic about Rachel, too."

He gave a lopsided shrug. "This isn't anything like that." Giving up trying to spot our waiter, he turned to face me again. "Well, let's talk about you. How's things at Old Stuff? How are Penny and the kids?"

"Penny is one of the kids. Hulda's my wife."

"Sometimes I feel like I've had my head in a Box. Hulda, of course, I meant Hulda. She's a very nice girl."

"We're all thriving. I added another dome to our place in Westchester Sanctuary. Roger's in Free Form I."

"What's that? School?"

"Something like the old kindergarten, only he studies Impressionist painting and skiing. His own choice. He's a bright boy."

"We were all bright boys," said Pete.

That was the last time I saw him before the events.

The rest of this I put together from talks I had with other people who knew Pete, and from police reports, newsdisc transcripts and some, I'd better admit, guesswork. I know Pete fairly well, and so I don't believe I'm too far off on my guesses. I tried to include Nitty Bender among those I got information from, but that became difficult, and I didn't want to jeopardize my relationship with Hulda even for a friend like Pete. Not that

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finding out exactly what happened will help him any. Mostly I wanted to find out for myself.

Pete continued on the nostalgia tour with Lectric Jack & Co. the day after we had lunch in what was left of Manhattan. If you weren't a kid in that particular small cluster of years around the late 1980s, you may not know much about Lectric Jack. He was sort of a puppet, only an electronic one. A fairly simple robot, and you had to punch a good many buttons to make him work. Back then, though, he was considered a fascinating variation on the older types of puppets and dummies. Uncle Charlie pushed the buttons. He was in his forties back then, a heavyset blond man, pink-faced, always dressed in a candy-stripe coverall with a straw cap on his head. Lectric Jack wore a suite of white tails and a white top hat. His face was humanoid, the features caricatured some, and silver-plated. All except his nose. Lectric Jack's little nose was solid gold, and he could play tunes out of it. None of this may sound exciting to you, but Uncle Charlie, Lectric Jack and the rest of the gang had 22,000,000 kids watching them in their peak year of 1988. Now, in 2003, all those 22,000,000 Lectric Jack fans were in their late teens and early twenties. Yesterday, Inc., located Uncle Charlie and Lectric Jack out in Asia2 someplace where they were supposedly working in a chain of automated pillbars. They refurbished the pair, put together the show package. Pete's job was to go along, do publicity, keep the show running smoothly, troubleshoot. What one of the Granny Strippers I was talking to at Old Stuff last week refers to as mother-henning a show.

Nothing got any better for Pete as the tour of campuses progressed around the country. Out in Iowa, where they were playing a pseudo-agricultural college, Pete got in a fist fight with the Mechanix Brothers. Nitty Bender had flown out to interview the brothers at the location of their latest discflik. When Pete dropped by her skytel he found her in bed with all three of the popular cyborgs. If you've ever been punched by someone with a metal fist, you can appreciate how Pete felt after tangling with the Mechanix Brothers.

It was out there in Iowa that Lectric Jack started putting jokes about Pete into the show. The electronic dummy started tossing some of his backstage vocabulary into his on stage performances. When this happened at a conservative religious Ohio university, the Flying Saucer Seminary, the faculty complained to Pete. He had a talk with Uncle Charlie.

"Don't tell me," said Uncle Charlie. "Tell this little schlub."

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"There you go again."

"It's being around him all the time," complained Uncle Charlie, jiggling the knee on which Lectric Jack was perched.

"Better stick you head back in the Box, schmuck," remarked the little robot. "As for you, Peter, why don't you find out who's running Nitty's scanties down to halfmast right this minute. I hear tell she's in New Hollywood interviewing a six-man airhockey team who —"

"That's another thing, Uncle Charlie," Pete began to pace around the dressing room. "I don't mind a little harmless kidding about my private life, but it isn't exactly nostalgia, is it? I've been getting complaints about your material from Yesterday, Inc. Oh, and stop goosing Toodles the Clown."

"Tell him." With his free hand Uncle Charlie brushed back his yellow hair, blinking and yawning.

"You don't understand comedy, putz," the silver-faced, gold-nosed robot dummy told Pete. "Physical comedy has always been my trademark. 25,000,000 kids ate it up."

"22,000,000" corrected Pete, "and you never goosed that damn clown in the old days."

"Sure I did, schlub. Uncle Charlie, don't collapse yet. Totter to your shaggy old feet and play Peter a batch of my old sh —"

"I don't want to see any of your old shows. I've seen enough of them. Watching your current stuff is fearful enough for —"

"Don't forget, schlep, it's Lectric Jack all those kids pile in to see," said the little robot. "I'm important. Fact is, I'm thinking of letting Nitty Bender interview me. When she —"

Wap!

Pete had slapped Lectric Jack across the face, knocking the dummy off Uncle Charlie's knee and fracturing two of his own fingers. "You're going to have to control yourself, Uncle Charlie," said Pete as he thrust his injured hand into his armpit. "I'm not going to have that little mechanical prick insult me over and over and —"

"Pete, I can't always control him." The old man swayed out of his chair, scooping up the fallen mechanism. He placed him in the realwood box Lectric Jack traveled in.

"Better go see a medic, schlep," advised Lectric Jack. "That's the hand you use for dipping into the till, isn't it?"

The pain from Pete's hurt fingers was zigzagging all the way up his arm. "Thing's better improve," he warned as he stalked out.

Things didn't improve. For example, from what I've been able to find out, Rachel's intrusions accelerated. Pete subscribed to the SlugSis television service, and he

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took his satellite-linked set along on the tour with him. He was in a Sharaton-Johnson Fly-Inn in Des Moines, downtown from the Iowa College of LP History, with Nitty Bender on this particular afternoon.

The beautiful red-haired gossip reporter was roaming her tower room in some lingerie from her collection of 20th Century underthings. "... dressing up little tiny dolls is okay, I tell them, but it's more fun to dress up yourself," she was saying in that piping, yet attractive, voice of hers. "Even so, what a surprise to find out Mr. Plant shares my hobby. There we were undressing in the Summer White House in Orlando when —"

"Wait, wait," said Pete, who was sitting in front of his portable SlugSis set. "You're alluding to Edward Simpson Plant, the current President of the United States of America?"

"Didn't you read my interview with him? It was in *Newzine* last week."

"The President of the United States collects lingerie?"

"Didn't I just now say so, Petey?" She, with a bounce, seated herself on the floating circular bed.

"He wears it?"

"No fun collecting if you don't wear it."

"The President of the United States is running around with ladies' lingerie on under his clothes?"

"You're too much around all those has-been celebs," said Nitty as she snapped the elastic on her garter belt. "You've picked up some outmoded notions about sexual roles."

"Never mind," he told the lovely girl and concentrated on the day's viewing log. *"Selection 26: Starvation in India.* Jesus, who wants to see that? *Selection 30: Hope for Airborne Cancers.* What kind of programming is —"

"You know who else collects lingerie?"

"Don't tell me, I'm uneasy enough already," He turned a page in the log. *"Selection 46: Rio Rita with Wheeler & Woolsey. A couple of zanies mix* ... Nope, I'm not in the mood for a couple of zanies. Ah, *Selection 51: Bleak House.*" He got out several special slugs, stuck one into the set slot.

The picture popped on, only it wasn't Dickens. It was a lean-faced blond girl, dressed in a somber grey plyofrock. "Won't you RECONSIDER, Pete? Don't you feel ANYTHING? Oh, dearest, if ONLY you knew how much I MISS you. Won't you, PLEASE, sign a new —"

"Rachel!" Pete jumped up, booted the set off the floating lucite table. "Now she's on SlugSis, talking in caps. That was one of the —"

"Look, LOOK, Pete," implored

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the girl on the overturned set, her image aimed at the bedroom ceiling. "I'm going down on my KNEES, begging you to let us BOTH be HAPPY again."

"She's truly," remarked Nitty while fiddling with her black lace, "getting to be —"

"It's all over. Finished. ENDED." Pete leaped, landed smack on the set.

Crackle! Crunch! Thunk!

He kept hopping up and down on the set. "This can't be legal, her showing up on my television."

"I'm sure she's within the law, she always is," said Nitty. "You'll cut your poor ankles all up if you don't stop that, Petey."

Pete noticed the streaks of blood on his legs and stepped out of the ruined set. "Going to have to talk to my attorneys again."

"Gather up that debris first," said the lovely gossip. "I'm due to interview Lectric Jack in less than an hour."

He dropped the chunks of set he'd been in the act of picking up. "Lectric Jack? You never mentioned —"

"Why do you think I came to Des Moines? I mean, besides my enormous need to be near you, Petey."

"You're not going to interview that little mechanical prick?"

"He's newsworthy again."

"Yeah, but I'm supposed to set up all the interviews with him."

Nitty's bare shoulders rose and fell. "This was arranged through Yesterday, Inc. I assumed you knew," she said. "Now you better gather up your set."

"Listen, Nitty, when you interview ... you don't ... with Lectric Jack you wouldn't ... that is, with Uncle Charlie ... never mind." He carried the remains of the set over to the dispozhole.

Lectric Jack didn't mention the interview until the thirteenth stop on the tour. The Lectric Jack & Co. show was playing at the underground campus of the Seattle Medicine As A Hobby College. It was the rainy season in Seattle, and some of the water was dripping down through thin cracks in the auditorium's domed roof.

Lectric Jack was finishing up his singalong segment, bouncing up and down on Uncle Charlie's knee, waving his top hat in the air, whistling through his golden nose. As the applause and pleased laughter faded, the robot dummy said, "Uncle Charlie, I'm going to be famous. Did you know?"

The old man blinked, ran his tongue over his lower lip. "Why, Jack, I had the idea you thought you were pretty darn famous already."

"I mean really famous, Uncle Charlie. I got interviewed by ..." He did the business with the tails of his

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white dress suit, flapping them to show how happy he was. "Oh, I blush when I think of it."

"Gee, sounds pretty special, Jack."

"It was." He whistled through his nose. "I was interviewed by Nitty Bender."

"No kidding, Jack?"

"You know all those dirty nasty rumors you hear about her?"

"I've heard a few, Jack."

The robot dummy laughed his tinny little laugh. "They're all true, Uncle Charlie. In fact —"

Wap! Wam!

Pete had come running out onto the stage. He whacked the dummy hard enough to send him sailing into the orchestra pit. "You keep quiet about Nitty, you senile old bastard," Pete warned, yanking Uncle Charlie up off his chair. "I'm getting damn tired of —"

"It's him," insisted the blurry-eyed old man. "He's hard to handle lately."

"Boo! Boo!"

"Bad form!"

"Hitting poor Jack."

"Hitting an old man!"

"Who is that nerf?"

"Get him off."

"Boo! Boo!"

Pete remembered there were two thousand college kids out there watching him. He let go of Uncle Charlie and went stomping from the stage.

"Ah, the grandeur of it all," chuckled Uncle Charlie.

"Now what?" said Pete.

The old man was flat on his back in the dead center of the small dressing room at the Cleveland Pop College auditorium. A head-size black cube, with wires spilling out of its hollow interior, rested near his head. His yellow hairplant had been singed and was still smoldering. A few feet away Lectric Jack rested in his polished realwood box.

"How really beautiful the world is," murmured Uncle Charlie, eyes closed, smile on his cracked lips.

"You must get a different perspective from flat on your ass." Pete grabbed the old man by the shoulders, tugged him to a sitting position and began slapping at his face. "Come on, you old boxhead. What did you do to yourself this time?"

"So much loveliness and peace in the world, especially here in Cleveland."

"Yeah, I've noticed." Pete let the old man drop back to his flatout position. He sprinted to the door, yelled for one of his assistants.

This was a man named Willard. I've talked to him since and got part of the story from him. "Yeah?"

"Help me lug Uncle Charlie into the first-aid room," ordered Pete. "Then find Dr. Springer."

"It's his night off. When we're

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on the road he's only got to work —"

"Okay, help me anyway."

They got Uncle Charlie down the blue ramp and into the aid room. He was humming contentedly, eyes still tight shut. "So much love, so much joy. We should all be happy as kings."

"We are that, at least," said Pete as they dumped the old man into the chair. "Do you know how to bring somebody out of a Box fit, Willard?"

"Don't think you can, unless Dr. Springer has a way. You want me to call him? He's being interviewed by Nitty Bender tonight I —"

"Never mind. Start slapping and shaking him, might work. We have to do our first show in twenty minutes."

"This," remarked Willard as he commenced pummeling the euphoric Uncle Charlie, "reminds me of the traditional show business situation I've become familiar with while pouring over Yesterday, Inc.'s vast archives."

"I know, the star gets sick and the newcomer takes his place. Do you think you can do Uncle Charlie's part of the act and manipulate that little mechanical prick?"

"Not me, no, sir. I turn to stone in front of an audience. Which is why I selected the backstage side of —"

"Who could?" While thinking, Pete, absently, helped slap Uncle Charlie.

It brought the old man no closer to reality. "How wonderful the course of each man's life can be. So filled with happiness."

Willard suggested: "You're personable, Pete. You certainly know the act. Manipulating the robot shouldn't be too hard. I think Uncle Charlie's got an instruction manual in one of his suitcases."

"The blue neoleather," murmured the old man.

"Okay, okay," Pete decided. "I'll do it."

"Don't worry, Pete," said the old man. "Jack's not as simple a mechanism as you've been led to ..." The words trailed off, replaced by joyful tittering.

Fifteen minutes later Pete was out on the semicircular stage with the white-suited Lectric Jack on his knee. He'd skimmed through the old instruction manual, knew which buttons to push to get the proper responses out of the robot dummy. The singalong went well, so did the skit with Toodles the Clown. The young audience was getting over the disappointment of not being able to see Uncle Charlie.

Then — Pete thought it was maybe because he pushed a wrong button — Lectric Jack said, "Is there a doctor in the house?"

Pete didn't recognize the line as

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the opening of any of the familiar routines. "Are you sick, Jack?"

"I'm heartsick over Uncle Charlie."

"Oh, he'll be up and around in no time."

"I think I know which house our doctor's in," said Lectric Jack, doing the business with the coattails and winking at the audience. "And with whom ..." He made a snorting, whistling sound through his gold nose.

Lips pressed tight, Pete stood, keeping his hands on the robot dummy. He turned him off, bowed toward the audience. "Now let's travel back to the golden age of childhood. Here, for your viewing pleasure and exactly as it looked in 1989, is a complete Lectric Jack & Co. show."

A screen came floating down from above.

Ducking, Pete trotted off into the wings. "Mechanical little prick, needling me about Nitty." He went, rapidly, to Uncle Charlie's dressing room.

The old man wasn't there.

Pete dropped Lectric Jack into his traveling case and shut the lid.

A girl appeared in the doorway, came hesitantly in and shut the door behind her. "I was out front, DEAREST," she said. "What a SURPRISE to see you up there. You looked so HANDSOME, Pete. Oh, DARLING, if only —"

"Go away, Rachel." He pressed at the hollows beneath his eyes. "I don't care how many legal permits you've got. You've got to stop haunting me. I've got another whole life going now, with new people."

"Your new girl is sleeping with a good many OTHERS," Rachel said. "That is what the dummy meant, isn't it?"

"Go away, dissolve." He eased closer to the girl's image.

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"You needn't be CONCERNED. No one SAW me follow you in here, Pete. I'm not above pleading and BEGGING."

He touched her shoulder. "You're real this time."

"I had to come in PERSON, Pete." Rachel began to cry. "To IMPLORE you to —"

"Jesus, you've got to stay away from me. The projections were bad enough, then showing up on my damn TV, but in person." He put his other hand on her other shoulder.

"I CAN'T stay away, dear. I LOVE you too much."

"Rachel, we had a contract. It ran out," he said. "This is all over."

"No, it CAN'T be."

His hands moved closer together, stopping at each side of her throat. "Yes, damn it, it is. It is, Rachel."

Rachel never said anything more, never had the chance.

He strangled her very swiftly. For several seconds, after Pete realized she was dead, he couldn't let go of her. His palms seemed stuck to the flesh of her neck. Finally he got free, let her collapse to the dressing room floor.

Pete was breathing through his mouth. "Wait, wait. She said she sneaked in here. Okay, so if I can get her out of here some way, I may be able to fake up some kind of explanation, some kind of alibi. Yeah, nobody saw her come in here and nobody saw me do what I did. So I've got a chance to —"

"Wrong again, schmuck. I saw you."

Pete turned around. The traveling case was wide open and Lectric Jack was sitting up in it grinning at him.

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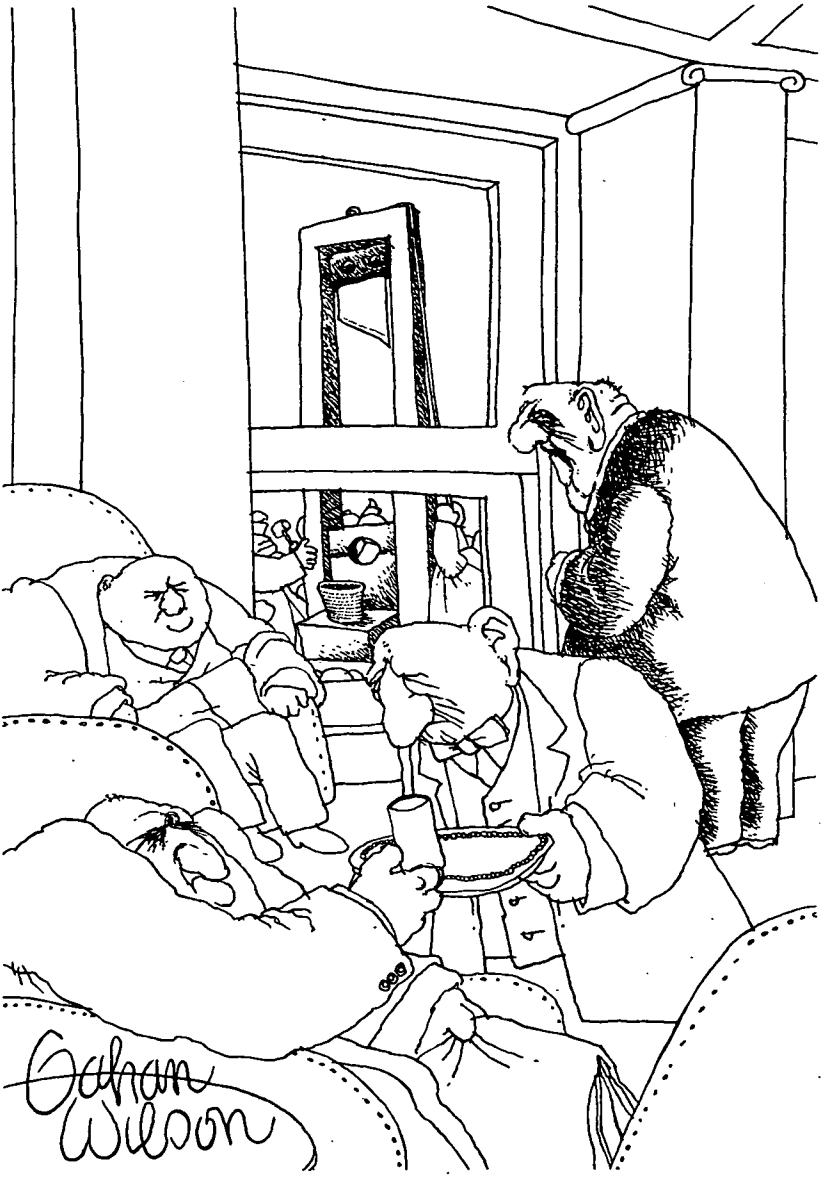

"What the hell's that all about?"

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Stephen King is the author of three bestselling horror novels: Carrie *(which turned into a box office hit as a movie),* Salem's Lot *(a fine chiller about a Maine town terrorized by vampires), and* The Shining *(which is being made into a film directed by Stanley Kubrick and starring Jack Nicholson). Mr. King is 30, lives in western Maine with his wife and three children. To our knowledge he has published very little short fiction, and we are pleased to offer this haunting tale about What Happened at the Farnum and Williams All-American 3-Ring Circus and Side Show.*

The Night of The Tiger

by STEPHEN KING

I first saw Mr. Legere when the circus swung through Steubenville, but I'd only been with the show for two weeks; he might have been making his irregular visits indefinitely. No one much wanted to talk about Mr. Legere, not even that last night when it seemed that the world was coming to an end — the night that Mr. Indrasil disappeared.

But if I'm going to tell it to you from the beginning, I should start by saying that I'm Eddie Johnston, and I was born and raised in Sauk City. Went to school there, had my first girl there, and worked in Mr. Lillie's five-and-dime there for a while after I graduated from high school. That was a few years back... more than I like to count, sometimes. Not that Sauk City's such a bad place; hot, lazy summer nights sitting on the front porch is all right for some folks, but it just seemed to *itch* me, like sitting in the same chair too long. So I quit the five-and-dime and joined Farnum & Williams' All-American 3-Ring Circus and Side Show. I did it in a moment of giddiness when the calliope music kind of fogged my judgment, I guess.

So I became a roustabout, helping put up tents and take them down, spreading sawdust, cleaning cages, and sometimes selling cotton candy when the regular salesman had to go away and bark for Chips Baily, who had malaria and sometimes had to go someplace far away and holler. Mostly things that kids do for free passes — things I used to do when I was a kid. But times change. They don't seem to come around like they used to.

We swung through Illinois and

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Indiana that hot summer, and the crowds were good and everyone was happy. Everyone except Mr. Indrasil. Mr. Indrasil was never happy. He was the lion tamer, and he looked like old pictures I've seen of Rudolph Valentino. He was tall, with handsome, arrogant features and a shock of wild black hair. And strange, mad eyes — the maddest eyes I've ever seen. He was silent most of the time; two syllables from Mr. Indrasil was a sermon. All the circus people kept a mental as well as a physical distance, because his rages were legend. There was a whispered story about coffee spilled on his hands after a particularly difficult performance and a murder that was almost done to a young roustabout before Mr. Indrasil could be hauled off him. I don't know about that. I do know that I grew to fear him worse than I had cold-eyed Mr. Edmont, my high school principal, Mr. Lillie, or even my father, who was capable of cold dressing-downs that would leave the recipient quivering with shame and dismay.

When I cleaned the big cats' cages, they were always spotless. The memory of the few times I had the vituperative wrath of Mr. Indrasil called down on me still have the power to turn my knees watery in retrospect.

Mostly it was his eyes — large and dark and totally blank. The eyes, and the feeling that a man capable of controlling seven watchful cats in a small cage must be part savage himself.

And the only two things he was afraid of were Mr. Legere and the circus's one tiger, a huge beast called Green Terror.

As I said, I first saw Mr. Legere in Steubenville, and he was staring into Green Terror's cage as if the tiger knew all the secrets of life and death.

He was lean, dark, quiet. His deep, recessed eyes held an expression of pain and brooding violence in their green-flecked depths, and his hands were always crossed behind his back as he stared moodily in at the tiger.

Green Terror was a beast to be stared at. He was a huge, beautiful specimen with a flawless striped coat, emerald eyes, and heavy fangs like ivory spikes. His roars usually filled the circus grounds — fierce, angry, and utterly savage. He seemed to scream defiance and frustration at the whole world.

Chips Baily, who had been with Farnum & Williams since Lord knew when, told me that Mr. Indrasil used to use Green Terror in his act, until one night when the tiger leaped suddenly from its perch and almost ripped his head from his shoulders before he could get out of the cage. I noticed that Mr. Indrasil always wore his hair

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long down the back of his neck.

I can still remember the tableau that day in Steubenville. It was hot, sweatingly hot, and we had a shirt-sleeve crowd. That was why Mr. Legere and Mr. Indrasil stood out. Mr. Legere, standing silently by the tiger cage, was fully dressed in a suit and vest, his face unmarked by perspiration. And Mr. Indrasil, clad in one of his beautiful silk shirts and white whipcord breeches, was staring at them both, his face dead-white, his eyes bulging in lunatic anger, hate, and fear. He was carrying a currycomb and brush, and his hands were trembling as they clenched on them spasmodically.

Suddenly he saw me, and his anger found vent. "You!" He shouted. "Johnston!"

"Yes, sir?" I felt a crawling in the pit of my stomach. I knew I was about to have the Wrath of Indrasil vented on me, and the thought turned me weak with fear. I like to think I'm as brave as the next, and if it had been anyone else, I think I would have been fully determined to stand up for myself. But it wasn't anyone else. It was Mr. Indrasil, and his eyes were mad.

"These cages, Johnston. Are they supposed to be clean?" He pointed a finger, and I followed it. I saw four errant wisps of straw and an incriminating puddle of hose water in the far corner of one.

"Y-yes, sir," I said, and what was intended to be firmness became palsied bravado.

Silence, like the electric pause before a downpour. People were beginning to look, and I was dimly aware that Mr. Legere was staring at us with his bottomless eyes.

"Yes, sir?" Mr. Indrasil thundered suddenly. "Yes, sir? Yes, sir? Don't insult my intelligence, boy! Don't you think I can see? *Smell?* Did you use the disinfectant?"

"I used disinfectant yest—"

"Don't answer me back!" He screeched, and then the sudden drop in his voice made my skin crawl. "Don't you *dare* answer me back." Everyone was staring now. I wanted to retch, to die. "Now you get the hell into that tool shed, and you get that disinfectant and swab out those cages," he whispered, measuring every word. One hand suddenly shot out, grasping my shoulder. "And don't you ever, ever speak back to me again."

I don't know where the words came from, but they were suddenly there, spilling off my lips. "I didn't speak back to you, Mr. Indrasil, and I don't like you saying I did. I — I resent it. Now let me go."

His face went suddenly red, then white, then almost saffron with rage. His eyes were blazing doorways to hell.

Right then I thought I was going to die.

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He made an inarticulate gagging sound, and the grip on my shoulder became excruciating. His right hand went up...up...up, and then descended with unbelievable speed.

If that hand had connected with my face, it would have knocked me senseless at best. At worst, it would have broken my neck.

It did not connect.

Another hand materialized magically out of space, right in front of me. The two straining limbs came together with a flat smacking sound. It was Mr. Legere.

"Leave the boy alone," he said emotionlessly.

Mr. Indrasil stared at him for a long second, and I think there was nothing so unpleasant in the whole business as watching the fear of Mr. Legere and the mad lust to hurt (or to kill!) mix in those terrible eyes.

Then he turned and stalked away.

I turned to look at Mr. Legere. "Thank you," I said.

"Don't thank me." And it wasn't a "don't thank *me,*" but a "*don't* thank me." Not a gesture of modesty, but a literal command. In a sudden flash of intuition — empathy, if you will — I understood exactly what he meant by that comment. I was a pawn in what must have been a long combat between the two of them. I had been captured by Mr. Legere rather than Mr. Indrasil. He had stopped the lion tamer not because he felt for me, but because it gained him an advantage, however slight, in their private war.

"What's your name?" I asked, not at all offended by what I had inferred. He had, after all, been honest with me.

"Legere," he said briefly. He turned to go.

"Are you with a circus?" I asked, not wanting to let him go so easily. "You seemed to know — him."

A faint smile touched his thin lips, and warmth kindled in his eyes for a moment. "No. You might call me a policeman." And before I could reply, he had disappeared into the surging throng passing by.

The next day we picked up stakes and moved on.

I saw Mr. Legere again in Danville and, two weeks later, in Chicago. In the time between I tried to avoid Mr. Indrasil as much as possible and kept the cat cages spotlessly clean. On the day before we pulled out for St. Louis, I asked Chips Baily and Sally O'Hara, the red-headed wire walker, if Mr. Legere and Mr. Indrasil knew each other. I was pretty sure they did, because Mr. Legere was hardly following the circus to eat our fabulous lime ice.

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Sally and Chips looked at each other over their coffee cups. "No one knows much about what's between those two," she said. "But it's been going on for a long time — maybe twenty years. Ever since Mr. Indrasil came over from Ringling Brothers, and maybe before that."

Chips nodded. "This Legere guy picks up the circus almost every year when we swing through the Midwest and stays with us until we catch the train for Florida in Little Rock. Makes old Leopard Man touchy as one of his cats."

"He told me he was a policeman," I said. "What do you suppose he looks for around here? You don't suppose Mr. Indrasil —?"

Chips and Sally looked at each other strangely, and both just about broke their backs getting up. "Got to see those weights and counterweights get stored right," Sally said, and Chips muttered something not too convincing about checking on the rear axle of his U-Haul.

And that's about the way any conversation concerning Mr. Indrasil or Mr. Legere usually broke up — hurriedly, with many hard-forced excuses.

We said farewell to Illinois and comfort at the same time. A killing hot spell came on, seemingly at the very instant we crossed the border, and it stayed with us for the next month and a half, as we moved slowly across Missouri and into Kansas. Everyone grew short of temper, including the animals. And that, of course, included the cats, which were Mr. Indrasil's responsibility. He rode the roustabouts unmercifully, and myself in particular. I grinned and tried to bear it, even though I had my own case of prickly heat. You just don't argue with a crazy man, and I'd pretty well decided that was what Mr. Indrasil was.

No one was getting any sleep, and that is the curse of all circus performers. Loss of sleep slows up reflexes, and slow reflexes make for danger. In Independence, Sally O'Hara fell seventy-five feet into the nylon netting and fractured her shoulder. Andrea Solienni, our bareback rider, fell off one of her horses during rehearsal and was knocked unconscious by a flying hoof. Chips Baily suffered silently with the fever that was always with him, his face a waxen mask, with cold perspiration clustered at each temple.

And in many ways, Mr. Indrasil had the roughest row to hoe of all. The cats were nervous and short-tempered, and every time he stepped into the Demon Cat Cage, as it was billed, he took his life in his hands. He was feeding the lions inordinate amounts of raw meat right before he went on, something that

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lion tamers rarely do, contrary to popular belief. His face grew drawn and haggard, and his eyes were wild.

Mr. Legere was almost always there, by Green Terror's cage, watching him. And that, of course, added to Mr. Indrasil's load. The circus began eyeing the silk-shirted figure nervously as he passed, and I knew they were all thinking the same thing I was: *He's going to crack wide open, and when he does* —

When he did, God alone knew what would happen.

The hot spell went on, and temperatures were climbing well into the nineties every day. It seemed as if the rain gods were mocking us. Every town we left would receive the showers of blessing. Every town we entered was hot, parched, sizzling.

And one night, on the road between Kansas City and Green Bluff, I saw something that upset me more than anything else.

It was hot — abominably hot. It was no good even trying to sleep. I rolled about on my cot like a man in a fever-delirium, chasing the sandman but never quite catching him. Finally I got up, pulled on my pants, and went outside.

We had pulled off into a small field and drawn into a circle. Myself and two other roustabouts had unloaded the cats so they could catch whatever breeze there might be. The cages were there now, painted dull silver by the swollen Kansas moon, and a tall figure in white whipcord breeches was standing by the biggest of them. Mr. Indrasil.

He was baiting Green Terror with a long, pointed pike. The big cat was padding silently around the cage, trying to avoid the sharp tip. And the frightening thing was, when the staff did punch into the tiger's flesh, it did not roar in pain and anger as it should have. It maintained an ominous silence, more terrifying to the person who knows cats than the loudest of roars.

It had gotten to Mr. Indrasil, too. "Quiet bastard, aren't you?" He grunted. Powerful arms flexed, and the iron shaft slid forward. Green Terror flinched, and his eyes rolled horribly. But he did not make a sound. "Yowl!" Mr. Indrasil hissed. "Go ahead and yowl, you monster! *Yowl!*" And he drove his spear deep into the tiger's flank.

Then I saw something odd. It seemed that a shadow moved in the darkness under one of the far wagons, and the moonlight seemed to glint on staring eyes — green eyes.

A cool wind passed silently through the clearing, lifting dust and rumpling my hair.

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Mr. Indrasil looked up, and there was a queer listening expression on his face. Suddenly he dropped the bar, turned, and strode back to his trailer.

I stared again at the far wagon, but the shadow was gone. Green Tiger stood motionlessly at the bars of his cage, staring at Mr. Indrasil's trailer. And the thought came to me that it hated Mr. Indrasil not because he was cruel or vicious, for the tiger respects these qualities in its own animalistic way, but rather because he was a deviate from even the tiger's savage norm. He was a rogue. That's the only way I can put it. Mr. Indrasil was not only a human tiger, but a rogue tiger as well.

The thought jelled inside me, disquieting and a little scary. I went back inside, but still I could not sleep.

The heat went on.

Every day we fried, every night we tossed and turned, sweating and sleepless. Everyone was painted red with sunburn, and there were fist-fights over trifling affairs. Everyone was reaching the point of explosion.

Mr. Legere remained with us, a silent watcher, emotionless on the surface, but, I sensed, with deep-running currents of — what? Hate? Fear? Vengeance? I could not place it. But he was potentially dangerous, I was sure of that. Perhaps more so than Mr. Indrasil was, if anyone ever lit his particular fuse.

He was at the circus at every performance, always dressed in his nattily creased brown suit, despite the killing temperatures. He stood silently by Green Terror's cage, seeming to commune deeply with the tiger, who was always quiet when he was around.

From Kansas to Oklahoma, with no letup in the temperature. A day without a heat prostration case was a rare day indeed. Crowds were beginning to drop off; who wanted to sit under a stifling canvas tent when there was an air-conditioned movie just around the block?

We were all as jumpy as cats, to coin a particularly applicable phrase. And as we set down stakes in Wildwood Green, Oklahoma, I think we all knew a climax of some sort was close at hand. And most of us knew it would involve Mr. Indrasil. A bizzare occurrence had taken place just prior to our first Wildwood performance. Mr. Indrasil had been in the Demon Cat Cage, putting the ill-tempered lions through their paces. One of them missed its balance on its pedestal, tottered and almost regained it. Then, at that precise moment, Green Terror let out a terrible, ear-splitting roar.

The lion fell, landed heavily, and suddenly launched itself with rifle-bullet accuracy at Mr. Indra-

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sil. With a frightened curse, he heaved his chair at the cat's feet, tangling up the driving legs. He darted out just as the lion smashed against the bars.

As he shakily collected himself preparatory to re-entering the cage, Green Terror let out another roar — but this one monstrously like a huge, disdainful chuckle.

Mr. Indrasil stared at the beast, white-faced, then turned and walked away. He did not come out of his trailer all afternoon.

That afternoon wore on interminably. But as the temperature climbed, we all began looking hopefully toward the west, where huge banks of thunderclouds were forming.

"Rain, maybe," I told Chips, stopping by his barking platform in front of the sideshow.

But he didn't respond to my hopeful grin. "Don't like it," he said. "No wind. Too hot. Hail or tornadoes." His face grew grim. "It ain't no picnic, ridin' out a tornado with a pack of crazy-wild animals all over the place, Eddie. I've thanked God more'n once when we've gone through the tornado belt that we don't have no elephants.

"Yeah," he added gloomily, "you better hope them clouds stay right on the horizon."

But they didn't. They moved slowly toward us, cyclopean pillars in the sky, purple at the bases and awesome blue-black through the cumulonimbus. All air movement ceased, and the heat lay on us like a woolen winding-shroud. Every now and again, thunder would clear its throat further west.

About four, Mr. Farnum himself, ringmaster and half-owner of the circus, appeared and told us there would be no evening performance; just batten down and find a convenient hole to crawl into in case of trouble. There had been corkscrew funnels spotted in several places between Wildwood and Oklahoma City, some within forty miles of us.

There was only a small crowd when the announcement came, apathetically wandering through the sideshow exhibits or ogling the animals. But Mr. Legere had not been present all day; the only person at Green Terror's cage was a sweaty high-school boy with a clutch of books. When Mr. Farnum announced the U.S. Weather Bureau tornado warning that had been issued, he hurried quickly away.

I and the other two roustabouts spent the rest of the afternoon working our tails off, securing tents, loading animals back into their wagons, and making generally sure that everything was nailed down.

Finally only the cat cages were left, and there was a special ar-

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rangement for those. Each cage had a special mesh "breezeway" accordioned up against it, which, when extended completely, connected with the Demon Cat Cage. When the smaller cages had to be moved, the felines could be herded into the big cage while they were loaded up. The big cage itself rolled on gigantic casters and could be muscled around to a position where each cat could be let back into its original cage. It sounds complicated, and it was, but it was just the only way.

We did the lions first, then Ebony Velvet, the docile black panther that had set the circus back almost one season's receipts. It was a tricky business coaxing them up and then back through the breezeways, but all of us preferred it to calling Mr. Indrasil to help.

By the time we were ready for Green Terror, twilight had come — a queer, yellow twilight that hung humidly around us. The sky above had taken on a flat, shiny aspect that I had never seen and which I didn't like in the least.

"Better hurry," Mr. Farnum said, as we laboriously trundled the Demon Cat Cage back to where we could hook it to the back of Green Terror's show cage. "Barometer's falling off fast." He shook his head worriedly. "Looks bad, boys. Bad." He hurried on, still shaking his head.

We got Green Terror's breezeway hooked up and opened the back of his cage. "In you go," I said encouragingly.

Green Terror looked at me menacingly and didn't move.

Thunder rumbled again, louder, closer, sharper. The sky had gone jaundice, the ugliest color I have ever seen. Wind-devils began to pick jerkily at our clothes and whirl away the flattened candy wrappers and cotton-candy cones that littered the area.

"Come on, come on," I urged and poked him easily with the blunt-tipped rods we were given to herd them with.

Green Terror roared ear-splittingly, and one paw lashed out with blinding speed. The hardwood pole was jerked from my hands and splintered as if it had been a greenwood twig. The tiger was on his feet now, and there was murder in his eyes.

"Look," I said shakily. "One of you will have to go get Mr. Indrasil, that's all. We can't wait around."

As if to punctuate my words, thunder cracked louder, the clapping of mammoth hands.

Kelly Nixon and Mike McGregor flipped for it; I was excluded because of my previous run-in with Mr. Indrasil. Kelly drew the task, threw us a wordless glance that said he would prefer facing the storm, and then started off.

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He was gone almost ten minutes. The wind was picking up velocity now, and twilight was darkening into a weird six o'clock night. I was scared, and am not afraid to admit it. That rushing, featureless sky, the deserted circus grounds, the sharp, tugging wind-vortices — all that makes a memory that will stay with me always, undimmed.

And Green Terror would not budge into his breezeway.

Kelly Nixon came rushing back, his eyes wide. "I pounded on his door for 'most five minutes!" He gasped. "Couldn't raise him!"

We looked at each other, at a loss. Green Terror was a big investment for the circus. He couldn't just be left in the open. I turned bewilderedly, looking for Chips, Mr. Farnum, or anybody who could tell me what to do. But everyone was gone. The tiger was our responsibility. I considered trying to load the cage bodily into the trailer, but *I* wasn't going to get my fingers in that cage.

"Well, we've just got to go and get him," I said. "The three of us. Come on." And we ran toward Mr. Indrasil's trailer through the gloom of coming night.

We pounded on his door until he must have thought all the demons of hell were after him. Thankfully, it finally jerked open. Mr. Indrasil swayed and stared down at us, his mad eyes rimmed and oversheened with drink. He smelled like a distillery.

"Damn you, leave me alone," he snarled.

"Mr. Indrasil —" I had to shout over the rising whine of the wind. It was like no storm I had ever heard of or read about, out there. It was like the end of the world.

"You," he gritted softly. He reached down and gathered my shirt up in a knot. "I'm going to teach you a lesson you'll never forget." He glared at Kelly and Mike, cowering back in the moving storm shadows. "Get out!"

They ran. I didn't blame them; I've told you — Mr. Indrasil was crazy. And not just ordinary crazy — he was like a crazy animal, like one of his own cats gone bad.

"All right," he muttered, staring down at me, his eyes like hurricane lamps. "No juju to protect you now. No grisgris." His lips twitched in a wild, horrible smile. "He isn't here now, is he? We're two of a kind, him and me. Maybe the only two left. My nemesis — and I'm his." He was rambling, and I didn't try to stop him. At least his mind was off me.

"Turned that cat against me, back in '58. Always had the power more'n me. Fool could make a million — the two of us could make a million if he wasn't so damned high

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and mighty... what's that?"

It was Green Terror, and he had begun to roar ear-splittingly.

"Haven't you got that damned tiger in?" He screamed, almost falsetto. He shook me like a rag doll.

"He won't go!" I found myself yelling back. "You've got to —"

But he flung me away. I stumbled over the fold-up steps in front of his trailer and crashed into a bone-shaking heap at the bottom. With something between a sob and a curse, Mr. Indrasil strode past me, face mottled with anger and fear.

I got up, drawn after him as if hypnotized. Some intuitive part of me realized I was about to see the last act played out.

Once clear of the shelter of Mr. Indrasil's trailer, the power of the wind was appalling. It screamed like a runaway freight train. I was an ant, a speck, an unprotected molecule before that thundering, cosmic force.

And Mr. Legere was standing by Green Terror's cage.

It was like a tableau from Dante. The near-empty cage-clearing inside the circle of trailers; the two men, facing each other silently, their clothes and hair rippled by the shrieking gale; the boiling sky above; the twisting wheatfields in the background, like damned souls bending to the whip of Lucifer.

"It's time, Jason," Mr. Legere said, his words flayed across the clearing by the wind.

Mr. Indrasil's wildly whipping hair lifted around the livid scar across the back of his neck. His fists clenched, but he said nothing. I could almost feel him gathering his will, his life force, his id. It gathered around him like an unholy nimbus.

And, then, I saw with sudden horror that Mr. Legere was unhooking Green Terror's breezeway — and the back of the cage was open!

I cried out, but the wind ripped my words away.

The great tiger leaped out and almost flowed past Mr. Legere. Mr. Indrasil swayed, but did not run. He bent his head and stared down at the tiger.

And Green Terror stopped.

He swung his huge head back to Mr. Legere, almost turned, and then slowly turned back to Mr. Indrasil again. There was a terrifyingly palpable sensation of directed force in the air, a mesh of conflicting wills centered around the tiger. And the wills were evenly matched.

I think, in the end, it was Green Terror's own will — his hate of Mr. Indrasil — that tipped the scales.

The cat began to advance, his eyes hellish, flaring beacons. And something strange began to happen to Mr. Indrasil. He seemed to be

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folding in on himself, shriveling, accordioning. The silk shirt lost shape, the dark, whipping hair became a hideous toadstool around his collar.

Mr. Legere called something across to him, and, simultaneously, Green Terror leaped.

I never saw the outcome. The next moment I was slammed flat on my back, and the breath seemed to be sucked from my body. I caught one crazily tilted glimpse of a huge, towering cyclone funnel, and then the darkness descended.

When I awoke, I was in my cot just aft of the grainery bins in the all-purpose storage trailer we carried. My body felt as if it had been beaten with padded Indian clubs.

Chips Baily appeared, his face lined and pale. He saw my eyes were open and grinned relievedly. "Didn't know as you were ever gonna wake up. How you feel?"

"Dislocated," I said. "What happened? How'd I get here?"

"We found you piled up against Mr. Indrasil's trailer. The tornado almost carried you away for a souvenir, m'boy."

At the mention of Mr. Indrasil, all the ghastly memories came flooding back. "Where is Mr. Indrasil? And Mr. Legere?"

His eyes went murky, and he started to make some kind of an evasive answer.

"Straight talk," I said, struggling up on one elbow. "I have to know, Chips. I *have* to."

Something in my face must have decided him. "Okay. But this isn't exactly what we told the cops — in fact we hardly told the cops any of it. No sense havin' people think we're crazy. Anyhow, Indrasil's gone. I didn't even know that Legere guy was around."

"And Green Tiger?"

Chips' eyes were unreadable again. "He and the other tiger fought to death."

"*Other* tiger? There's no other —"

"Yeah, but they found two of 'em, lying in each other's blood. Hell of a mess. Ripped each other's throats out."

"What — where —"

"Who knows? We just told the cops we had two tigers. Simpler that way." And before I could say another word, he was gone.

And that's the end of my story — except for two little items. The words Mr. Legere shouted just before the tornado hit: *"When a man and an animal live in the same shell, Indrasil, the instincts determine the mold!"*

The other thing is what keeps me awake nights. Chips told me later, offering it only for what it might be worth. What he told me was that the strange tiger had a long scar on the back of its neck.

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Barry Knister writes: "I hold a B.A. from Kalamazoo College and an M.A. in English from Wayne State University. I spent a year studying French in Nice and mastered, with tutoring, the phrase 'Le stylo est sur la table.' After two years as a Peace Corp volunteer in Micronesia I did not *master the byzantine aspects of bureaucratic life as practiced by the departments of State or Interior. Since 1968 I've been teaching English at Lawrence Institute of Technology, including a course in Science Fiction Classics."*

The Beckfords

by BARRY KNISTER

Kelly's first knowledge of the Beckfords came by way of Russia. He had been sent by the Department of Agriculture, less to arrange the new grain trade agreement than for political reasons. No one else in the department had a knowledge of Russian, and since it was known checks would be made on the group's credentials, it seemed unwise to send someone without an actual position. As a linguist he had been hired to translate foreign language articles but was otherwise neither knowledgeable nor interested in the field.

The trade mission arrived in Russia shortly after various internal changes: a premier deposed, now in retirement on a dacha outside Moscow, his key lieutenants relieved of their posts and shunted off to obscure areas. But what was of interest to Washington was the quick and unpublicized ouster of the newly appointed Minister of Agriculture. Leo Vrinsk was known as a brilliant young planner who had risen quickly through party ranks. His selection by the Central Committee to rejuvenate collective farming had surprised no one, and it was Kelly's task to learn why he had so quickly disappeared from the hierarchy.

The Americans were greeted enthusiastically, given sumptuous suites in the Hotel Europa, toasted to the point of stupor the first evening. Those who had made the trip the previous year detected a new note of desperation in this treatment that suggested things might be worse with the Russian harvest than had been imagined. At a party given for the Russians in the American Embassy following the third day of discussions, Kelly made his initial enquiries regarding former Minister Vrinsk, and to his surprise the Russian liaison officer responded openly to his questions.

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"Yes, yes, you must wonder about his retirement. Perhaps that is why you are here?" Divested so quickly of cloak and dagger, Kelly fell silent, and the Russian laughed in a friendly, familiar way which told him he need not worry.

"But surely he was one of your brightest men. His politics perhaps — or that he was born a Jew?"

"Not at all, Mr. Kelly, neither apply. And, yes, it is true, a brilliant young man — his collapse is a great disappointment. It seems the pressure of the new responsibilities exceeded his capacities. You see, Minister Vrinsk has gone quite mad — hence the silence. He has been released from hospital and now lives modestly a few kilometers from Mscow. We have no wish to trouble him. Nor have we any desire to cause curiosity about so simple a matter. You would like to visit him?"

The arrangements were made, and two days later he was driven to Vrinsk's home, a small unpainted cottage surrounded by plowed fields, the chalk-white towers of Moscow apartment buildings rising in the distance. Only the chauffeur had accompanied him, a clear indication of Vrinsk's new status. They parked on the road and crossed the soft furrows and ridges to the low wooden porch. Kelly readied his note of introduction and knocked. A moment passed — he knocked again and looked at the driver, who shrugged. Then he heard a muted mumbling which came from outside, to their right, and stepping to the end of the porch, Kelly saw a small listing shed, the door closed but clearly the source of the voice.

It grew louder as they approached, still unintelligible. He stepped to the shed's grimed window and saw Vrinsk in profile sitting on a stool and reading from a book, oblivious and rocking slightly in time to the words. Kelly recognized him immediately from the photos and slides they had shown him in Washington, and so far was Vrinsk from looking mad that it was a second or two before he wondered at the scene, the rocking, and realized the words were still without meaning.

The driver now stepped to his side, his shadow falling acorss the open book in Vrinsk's hand. The Russian's head snapped up, eyes glowering as he jumped to his feet and the stool toppled. Kelly, embarrassed at the intrusion, was again conscious of Vrinsk's condition. He tried to smile. The Russian stared back, disappeared, and the door opened. Kelly hesitated, the door swinging from loose hinges, then entered and extended his hand as he began to introduce himself in his best Russian. He was cut short.

"No doubt Moscow requires an

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accounting, why I borrowed the plow, the seeds. Always there must be an accounting. Why can you not think of it as therapy, a sick man growing a garden?" His voice was weary and cynical, the Semitic nostrils flaring as he spoke. "You are rid of me, I hurt no one, I wish only to satisfy myself. Why are you not busy with the farms, more chemicals, more tractors — hah!" He stood with legs spread, stocky and dark with black hair, dressed in a soiled white shirt, his trousers stuffed into mud-covered boots, and he slapped the book on his thigh with impatience.

"Please excuse this intrusion, Minister Vrinsk. I am Peter Kelly of the American Trade Delegation." He stepped forward with his letter.

"That is remarkable, I am Peter the Great. The year is 1721 and I have just reorganized the Church." The driver, still outside, called from the doorway.

"It's true Comrade Vrinsk, what he says."

The book stopped slapping, and Vrinsk looked at Kelly, at his clothes, still suspicious. "I see. One of two things is true. Either you represent some pathetic new method they have devised for learning the secrets I say openly, or I am now an attraction for tourists. Has the ballet so declined, will they next take you to see ex-premier Stavrov shooting rabbits?"

"No, sir, you are considered an important agronomist in my country. Political matters do not enter in. I am paying a courtesy call and have no wish to trouble you."

After a moment Vrinsk took the letter and read it slowly, then handed it back. "I will ask you one question, the letter means nothing. Have you heard of the Beckfords?"

Kelly looked blank, assuming the name must relate to his supposed area of expertise, and he winced as the former minister tossed his head back and laughed.

"A good sign, perhaps it is as you say — perhaps I am not even Peter the Great. Were you a security agent, I am sure you would humor me by knowing. But of course no one does." He set the stool upright and motioned to it with the book. "You would care to sit? I have no time to be social. I will tell you my story, one you are familiar with if you are an agent, one that will confirm what you have heard of my madness if you are not."

He sat and followed the Russian's movements as he began to pace before him. The driver peered around the entry, shaking his head at Kelly each time Vrinsk passed him.

The Russian now stopped in the corner, opened the book and began to read. It was vaguely Russian but

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Kelly could not comprehend. Vrinsk stopped and closed the book with a snap.

"That is old Church Slavonic. I am reading from the missal. Any of the holy works will do, but in this area, this region, old Church Slavonic is best." The American hoped his face registered sincere interest. So it was religion that had destroyed the brilliant Leo Vrinsk — too many victims trampled on the way to the top, perhaps? Or the shame of privilege received from those who now persecuted the less chosen in Russia among the Chosen People?

"You are embarrassed," Vrinsk said, and Kelly looked up at his now sullen features. "How pathetic, you think, he is a Jew and not even able to be crazy in his own tradition. Now he thinks he is the Russian patriarch when he should at least be a rabbi. You are wrong, I am a simple — your American word is pragmatist." Kelly began a polite denial, but Vrinsk walked to the window and stood looking out.

"I met the Beckfords when I accompanied Khrushchev — ten years ago, to America. It was on a farm, somewhere in the Middlewest. They were the owner's guests, they said, introduced to us as we toured the buildings and fields, watched demonstrations of your machinery, sniffed handfuls of grain. You are old enough, no doubt you saw the funny Russians in our baggy suits on television. I was thirty, the youngest in our delegation. My English is good, I passed the time with the old American couple, a pleasant change from the newsmen, the fawning politicians. 'Do you also have a farm?' I asked. 'No, we have no farm, we prefer to help others.' 'Ah, then you are working here,' I said. 'Yes, perhaps you may call it work but we do not think of it that way.' And I remember the next moment perfectly. His wife touched his sleeve as he was about to speak, afraid of some embarrassment, something that would make the Russian uncomfortable.

"Then of course I was dragged away — to see a thing called a hog parlor, more of your contraptions. I forgot the Beckfords, did not see them again until we were leaving. And it was only by chance I glanced up at the house as I stepped into the car. They were side by side, at a third-floor window, hands folded on the window sill. I thought they were watching us, and I waved, then saw they were not looking down but out, towards the fields. Only when we reached the main road did I have my — what do you call it — my surmise, my question. I do not know why. I turned, looked back. We were on a small hill where the farm road joined the highway, and only from that angle would I

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have seen it, the contrast. I do not know which came to me first — that they, the Beckfords — had been kneeling at the window, remembering them half-concealed, or that they were facing out, to the planted land, the land on the opposite side fallow. The thought of them praying like that, after seeing so many gadgets, your American technology — I know those in the car with me thought my laughter very foolish, no doubt mention was made of it. Perhaps that laugh is in my file and has helped the Moscow doctors in my case."

He glanced over his shoulder and caught Kelly looking at the driver, who had shrugged again from outside, then turned back to the window. "He has been here before; he drives officials who come to reason with me, to assess my health. They still hope I may be of use. No doubt he is bored."

"I'm sorry, please go on. You left then?"

"Left, yes. Our mission returned to Moscow. For nine years I struggled with problems of soil, irrigation, methods of harvest and storage, fertilization, logistics. Sometimes I would remember the image of the Beckfords in the upper window, the scene from a distance at dusk, the flourishing corn, and I would laugh. Especially I would remember when visiting the collectives, dreary places, unproductive in the face of our most zealous efforts. Every technological resource imaginable brought to bear with negligible results. Then the humiliating grain purchases abroad, open admission of our failure. Why, why? — we asked. Our efforts were redoubled, tripled.

"But it is because of the memory, only because of those images that I understood the meaning of Levinsky, a small town in the interior, stetl farms, an isolated community of Jews. Their methods were outmoded, resources restricted, cut off; and yet — yes, there is no question — ask them to show you the figures — turning in the highest yields in the country."

"Ah, yes, the ancient methods, the way of the fathers," Kelly said, knowing nothing of either.

"Not the ancient methods." He turned to Kelly and raised the book, slowly weighing it in his hand. "In the new Russia we do not believe in God. Religion is opiate, cancerous. Science is god. But Levinsky knew none of this, isolated, removed. Hundreds of years, the Jews there praying and gnashing over their fields, still praying and gnashing. I was only passing through and stopped out of curiosity, nostalgia perhaps. I had grown up on such farms.

"I did not want to believe, that is the truth. I was of the new age, I was revolted to again see such

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primitive ways, the ignorance, arms raised in the fields beseeching, grown men and women calling out like some Stone Age colony. But back in Moscow I could not keep away from the books, the documents. I could not sleep, I studied records, production statistics dating back to tsarist times, correlating them with security reports on the vestiges of religious activity in the country — reducing, analyzing. Until it was too plain, horribly obvious: the crops grew better where they were prayed for. They grew best where the religion and crops were both historic to the region."

Kelly could only stare at him.

"Do not worry, I am almost finished. I gathered my findings for a year, painstakingly, for I knew how I would be received. I knew the reason for Mrs. Beckford's restraining touch on her husband's sleeve so long ago. She was right to do it. Then my appointment came with the new regime. I was Minister of Agriculture, respected, considered shrewd and valuable. The time seemed perfect, the collectives in a shambles, production declining everywhere — I was sure they would try anything. How naive I was — can you imagine the scene in the Kremlin, the Politburo members listening somberly around the conference table as I unfolded the story with charts and maps: Orthodox litanies here because the soil and seed are most sympathetic to it; the Catholic missal and breviary there, traditionally so; the old testament there, best sung. But regardless, the necessity of open, vocal daily prayer in the fields, orchards, in the truck gardens of the Black Sea. I had worked it out carefully; I was sure the peasants would be very happy — they would work and pray in shifts as I described it. *I* was the practical man in that room, interested only in results, the facts I presented simple and undeniable.

"But you know what happened. They were not practical, they were cardinals, popes. I take back what I said. I am not Peter the Great, I am Galileo."

Vrinsk abruptly turned his back on the American and opened the book, looking for his page, the interview obviously over. Kelly rose to go as Vrinsk began once more to read. The voice halted as he stepped to the entry, and the two men now looked at one another.

"One thing," the Russian said and Kelly nodded. "You see the soil here has just been planted. Tell those in Moscow to mark the date. Tell them I am praying daily. In the Second War I have heard the British brought witch doctors to London from their African colonies. A very progressive people, the British. Good-by."

Kelly gave the message to the

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sad-faced liaison officer the following afternoon and ten days later returned to Washington, made his report and settled once more into the daily routine.

He found that the story of the mad Russian proved so amusing to women that he polished it with each retelling. That fall he was in demand among Washington hostesses, and at some point during the parties or receptions he was always asked about "Crazy Leo." For this reason the details remained fresh in his mind; he sometimes speculated to the guests about the Beckfords on that afternoon ten years ago, no doubt taking the late afternoon sun in chairs at the open window, not kneeling. Or perhaps they were charlatans of some sort and did peddle "agri-prayer," as he called it in one of his party versions.

They stopped asking him for the story by Christmas, but it was revived again in March when Leo Vrinsk's name began to reappear in *Izvestia* and *Pravda* — matter-of-factly at first but with increasing emphasis. His full return to power in Russia was clearly evident by May Day when Kelly saw him pictured on the front page of the Russian paper, strategically close to the premier on the famous balcony as they watched the parade in Red Square.

But as the weeks passed, it became increasingly difficult for Kelly to talk on the subject. His colleagues had been jockeying for months to be sent with what was now thought of as the annual grain-trade delegation, some asking him for tips on how to be included. As spring came and went, the Russians remained silent, nor were the Canadians approached. It baffled his superiors, and in some strange way changed people's attitude toward Kelly, as though he were responsible for the silence. It was annoying, and he would chide himself at his desk or in restaurants when he caught himself thinking of Vrinsk and the mythical Beckfords. His work began to suffer; he became surly or silent when the inevitable jokes came with predictions of bumper yields in the Soviet Union. By July, it was firmly suggested he needed a rest.

He sat around his apartment and drank for a week, bothered friends with mumbled telephone calls, then got his face slapped one evening as he began to pray for twins while undressing a girl he had brought home after dinner. The next morning he vaguely remembered telling her that it was an experiment as she had nervously rebuttoned her blouse, that he wished to prove birth control pills no match for the life force. It was stupid but it had gotten out of hand.

That afternoon he called the

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office and had a quizzical secretary locate the itinerary for Khrushchev's visit ten years ago. He phoned the farm and spoke to the owner, fabricating a story about an article he was writing on the historic event. He hoped to meet a couple named Beckford who had been present that day — did the farmer know where they were?

"Sure, exchange Christmas cards every year." There was a pause. "Why you want to talk to Fred and Estelle?"

"Oh, just for a kind of man-in-the-street impression. I happened to hear their name mentioned in connection with the trip to your farm."

"They were guests."

"I see."

"I don't know anything about what they've been doing, though. They're in California." The farm owner seemed reluctant at first but finally gave him the address, and Kelly, cursing himself, sent a telegram seeking permission to visit. A reply came by night letter the next morning: "Dear Mr. Kelly, we would be delighted." He made flight reservations, wired his time of arrival, and two days later his plane took off for San Diego.

Kelly felt secretive and sat alone. He had told no one of the trip and ate his lunch furtively, suspicious of the stewardess's toothy smiles. He would rent a car if they weren't at the airport, make his visit and confirm what his reason knew already: that the Beckfords were either cranks or charlatans or both — probably both. Then he would fly back cured, having escaped both breakdown and rest home.

With his second drink, he began to relax and was soon sure his little spate of hysteria would make a very funny party story. He hoped the Beckfords would turn out to be eccentric, for the story's sake, and tried to visualize them as he had so often in the last month. Probably Bible Belt crackers, he thought, which would be good since he did a great cracker dialect. By the time the plane landed he was smiling back at the stewardess, still smiling as he stepped down the staircase and walked with the other passengers toward the waiting crowd at the gate. He reached the fence and waited as the crowd thinned, then saw a dark, athletic man in khaki shirt and pants approaching him.

"Mr. Kelly?" He nodded. The man reached out and shook his hand warmly, smiling with an intimate, almost grateful manner. "I'm Stavros Pelopon. The Beckfords are expecting you. Please, this way."

The man took his flight bag and led him to a dusty station wagon. "Pelopon Olive Groves" was stenciled on the tailgate, and as they

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drove, the housing developments gradually gave way to low, dun-colored slopes and farms. Mr. Pelopon glanced often at Kelly as he spoke, his ruddy face open and friendly. He told of selling the family restaurant in San Diego four years before, of the disappointments as he and his cousin watched the young olive trees, imported from Greece, shrink and die on his hillsides. It had seemed he must abandon his dream until he learned of the Beckfords from a friend — laughed at first, then stopped laughing after a visit to an Indian village in Mexico where the Beckfords had worked a miracle.

"It was fantastic, a very primitive place, Indian not Spanish. Aztec, I suppose. They were still using the traditional ways but had lost their religion. The Beckfords studied up on the area and stayed a year." He looked again at Kelly. "Do you know about them?" he asked softly, with reverence.

"Not much," Kelly answered, hoping not to betray himself.

"They are holy people, Mr. Kelly. That is all I know."

They drove in silence, and Kelly worked to maintain his confidence by feeling sorry for Pelopon, apparently an honest, amiable dolt who was being had. He wanted to ask questions but was prevented by Pelopon's serene smile.

They turned off the main highway and jolted along a pair of grooves worn in the undulating fields of barren ground until they crested a rise. Below them and surrounding the houses and tin-roofed outbuildings in the valley stretched the careful geometry of small shrublike trees jutting from the slopes. They drove down, parked in one of the sheds, and Pelopon, still silent and solicitous towards Kelly, walked him toward the smallest of three white frame houses. He stopped at the porch steps, warmly shook Kelly's hand once more and said something in Greek.

"That is our greeting for — honored guests. I would join you but have duties." He smiled and walked back towards the barns.

Someone was already waiting behind the screen door when Kelly turned towards the house, and as he climbed the steps, the door squeaked open and Mr. Beckford faced him. "Please come in, Mr. Kelly, so glad you've come."

The voice was deep and aristocratic. He stook the man's hand, nodding as Mr. Beckford introduced himself and asked about his flight. He answered automatically but was shaken by the regal appearance before him, the long, pure white hair made more striking by a large face deeply lined and permanently dark from the sun. Mr. Beckford wore a white flowing robe, his

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head crowned with a chaplet of glossy leaves, and it was only as Kelly followed the sandaled feet down the narrow hallway that any of these details seemed odd.

The living room was large and airy, the sparse furnishings giving it a tranquil aspect. But Kelly only glanced around him before turning back to the arresting, patriarchal man he had thought would be a redneck. A wizened, cheerful woman now came from the kitchen, and Mr. Beckford introduced his wife. Like her husband, she was heavily lined and dark, her hair a snowy arrangement of curls crowned with a wreath of leaves. Her toes peeped from under a full-length robe, and her voice gave evidence of Eastern Seaboard origins and education.

Mr. Beckford moved a rocking chair from its corner for Kelly, then joined his wife on the couch, automatically taking her gnarled hand in his as they smiled at him. Entwined, the old hands looked like roots against Mr. Beckford's white robe, and Kelly looked from them to the young flourishing bushes framed in the window behind them. It was peaceful and organic, the old couple brown like the soil, the small trees like geometric rows of locked hands. He realized a part of him wanted to believe.

"It's wonderful having a visitor, Mr. Kelly, and so timely just now, isn't it, dear," Mrs. Beckford said, her husband nodding. "We move about so much it's been impossible to make friends, and when someone does come we feel blessed."

"Blessed, yes, Mr. Kelly," said Beckford, and Kelly felt a certain shame as he faced their open sincerity, their innocence. He quickly began to tell them the story of Leo Vrinsk, and they frowned together, looking alike; then both remembered and nodded as he described the Russian's image of them at the window years before. He told them of his own visit to Russia, of how Vrinsk had collected data which convinced him of the efficacy of prayer in the fields.

"They aren't negotiating a grain deal with us or Canada this year, and Vrinsk's name has begun to appear again in their press."

"Yes, yes, I remember the day quite well now, and Mr. Vrinsk was right in all respects, right down to Estelle's stopping me. And later we had retired to our room, kneeling as he told you at the window — it was time in our schedule. And of course Estelle was right that day, as always —" he raised their joined hands from his lap — "I am sure Mr. Vrinsk would have dismissed us as cranks had I told him of our mission, forgotten us forever."

Hearing the word he had applied to them himself pained Kelly and he looked at them soberly. He

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realized he had completely forgotten to mention his fabricated article and that they had said nothing about it. Probably they knew it had been a lie.

"You see, it isn't something you can convince people of by talking about it — dear Lord, no, we found that out soon enough forty years ago. Remember, love?" Mr. Beckford said, not having to look for her answer as she squeezed his hand. "Forty years ago, and right here in California where we learned nature's simple law — that plants, seeds and soil have spirit and respond to love and attention. We were simple ministers of the gospel preaching the word to the humble people who had come here from the dust bowl. We traveled among them, and they were grateful because it was never our intention, never has been, to make money or own things. We stayed with families then as we do now. That's why I told your Russian friend we could not consider what we did work. And then an initial loss which was, we believe, tied to the knowledge given to us by nature herself."

Mr. and Mrs. Beckford sat in silent reflection, staring through him at the past, joined, it seemed, by a lifetime of memories that now came to rest on a single moment, and he was sure their thoughts were identical.

"Our only child — a little girl we named after the biblical Ruth — was playing, not in the "alien corn" as Keats so movingly describes her, but in a field of small rolling hills which is today one of California's most famous vineyards." Mr. Beckford's eyes focused now on Kelly, his wife still wistful with reverie. "Our host kept a few sheep and had given Ruth a lamb, a princely gift in those times, and she loved it dearly from that moment, really more companion for her than the farmer's children, who were always at chores. It was a lonely life for a child, always moving among strangers, with no real home but the changing landscape itself. But in those few days it became impossible to imagine the two had ever been apart; you knew this was true from the faces of those farm people, hardened by bad luck and poverty. They would come from the neighboring farms for the prayer meetings we held under a canvas canopy in the yard. Estelle and I would see them glance out during the meetings to where Ruth was playing with the lamb on one of the little hills. They would soften at the sight, their faces grow calm. And on that day — we have no doubt, Estelle and I, about it — a Sunday, so taken one-by-one were the fifty or so gathered there, looking one-by-one away from me as I preached, that soon we were all silently watching from beneath the canvas, united

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in the contemplation of child, lamb and earth, all three linked in ways none could have explained but all understood. No, we do not doubt that the moment was part of some plan. I whispered a benediction as we all watched, and the group slowly departed."

"I didn't even collect the hymnals," Mrs. Beckford said. "We feel the beauty of that last day she was with us is responsible for our understanding what followed." She was not wistful any longer, the two of them gently regarding him, as thin curtains puffed in the brilliant window behind them. It was obvious they had told the story many times before, speaking it almost as a litany to him, but he found nothing contrived in this. Their quiet voices made him feel like an initiate, an acolyte being introduced to the Mysteries.

"You see," Mr. Beckford said slowly, "little Ruth was taken the next day, the lamb as well. We had all eaten breakfast, and Estelle and I were writing letters as we often did in the mornings, many of those who relied on us being unable to read or write. It was a house very much like this one, and we did the writing on folding tables set up on the porch. Ruth was just below us in the yard with her pet, but at some point we forgot her, lost in our work and she wandered off. When we next looked up and saw our host running from beyond the hill, I think we both" — Mrs. Beckford nodded emphatically — "both knew she was gone from us. He was running down the slope of the hill; we realized Ruth was not in the yard. We had seen him an hour before as he drove into the yard with a rented tractor and disk harrow — 'Going to make something of this land yet!' he called, and we had both waved him good luck.

"The ground was irregular there, full of small depressions and scrub. It would have been easy not to see them. We ran to meet him; he was panting and weeping in a way that told us it was over, done with. I don't know what made me do it, the finality in his face, I suppose, but I walked straight to the barn and Estelle followed. We took shovels, and all of us, the family and Estelle and I, walked across the field to the hill. He begged us not to go, not to look, but we had both already seen it in our minds. We knew we must bury her, the two of us, there where she was. At the top we looked down, saw the two of them behind the harrow, the tractor still running. I know I wanted to be bitter, but I could not be; I wanted to hate the farmer, think him careless or stupid, but he was neither. We sent them all away, went down and buried Ruth and the pet lamb where they lay."

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Kelly did not trust his voice and said nothing. He was deeply moved by the story, by the calm voice which bore no evidence of loss or self-pity. Nothing he might say could mean anything.

"Perhaps it seems callous to you, Mr. Kelly." He shook his head. "It just was what we knew we must do, give the two lambs back to the earth silently and without regret. And we insisted the farmer plant his crop, although he did not want to at first — insisted he plant all the land. We stayed on, took to going out to the field to pray and meditate, together or alone but with a growing sense of being with Ruth, pantheism I suppose you could call it, so that we found ourselves praying to and communing with the field itself, to the growing plants. It was all one to us, we came to see; there had been no separation from little Ruth. What is Wordsworth's line — 'Roll'd round in earth's diurnal course, with rocks, and stones and trees.' I don't imagine we could have felt that way if it were not literally true. We began putting our canopy up on the hill, held our services there. And the people were sympathetic at first, joining us there, listening politely as Estelle and I preached our new gospel, and oneness of all creation. Only one or two really understood and believed; the rest were good Christians indulging us. But we were not grieving at all, did not feel we had lost Ruth for a moment. Eventually only those few and the farmer's family were left. But it was enough. If you were to go there today, you would understand our conviction. It is a garden in the desert, and the family has carried on with daily prayer in the fields ever since."

The revelation completed, the two old people slowly turned toward each other. "Shall we have the refreshment now, dear?" Mrs. Beckford said, smoothing wisps of white hair behind her ear.

"Yes, Estelle, I'm sure Mr. Kelly is ready for something after so much talk from us."

She got up and went into the kitchen with a shuffling of her sandals which made Kelly snatch after his slipping objectivity. He could feel himself, like the fulcrum of a scale weighing the strong personal attraction of the Beckfords against all he had ever believed, simultaneously moved to laughter at the sheets, the crowns of myrtle leaves, and wonder at the possibility the Beckfords represented. Of course it seemed likely they had been traumatized by the death of the child and had compensated for the loss by devising their new faith. But he must know for sure and resolved to learn where they had been these forty years and what had happened.

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"So you've been praying at farms ever since?" he asked, hoping Beckford might give him details, place names he could check. The old man nodded.

"Yes, word of mouth has charted our course; we've been all over the nation and to several foreign countries as well. Egypt for cotton, rubber in the Philippines, several trips to Mexico and South America. Of course we refuse offers from exploiters of any kind. We have learned new truths in all these places, learned to respect folkways and laws of the land which are quite different from our original Christian teachings. At first it was quite difficult, sometimes repugnant to practice customs and rituals foreign to our own past. But once one learns the great law, that all is one, that there is no division between man and nature, such prejudices seem very foolish. It is really quite arrogant to think that man alone has a destiny — the same may be said of the world of growing things. And as your Russian friend put it, dogma often obscures the truth of new discoveries."

Mrs. Beckford came from the kitchen. She balanced a tray on which rested three antique copper goblets, heavy ones, Kelly realized, as she handed one to him. "Beautiful," he said, turning it to see the pattern of grapes and leaves deeply embossed in the metal.

"Mr. Pelopon tells us they have been in his family for hundreds of years, museum pieces," she said and sat again beside her husband. "He very graciously offered them to us when we told him you were coming to visit."

"Well, here's health to Mr. Pelopon," Kelly said and they all drank. It was sweet, a chilled wine mixed with fruit juice, and he nodded approval.

"He is a very good man, very hard-working and open to new ideas — rather to old ideas long forgotten," Mr. Beckford said. "You've no doubt wondered at our Doric clothes. It isn't really necessary to wear them, but what we are doing here is ancient and somehow deserves our respect for all things Greek. After questioning Mr. Pelopon about the olive bushes and their sad deaths, we did some research and discovered the species to have come down from Minoan, Mycenaean times, about eleven or twelve hundred years before Christ. Remarkably, they have retained — I don't know what else to call it — a consciousness of their origins."

"Do you simply pray to the spirit of the earth, or what?" Kelly asked.

"Oh, it's a little more involved than that," Mr. Beckford said, and Mrs. Beckford laughed girlishly. "We try to adjust our devotions as closely as possible. Although it is

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hundreds of years later, we are finding that Homer and the literature of the golden age appeals very much to them. Estelle just now is reading the *Oresteia* on the west slope, and I am doing certain dithyrambs and prayers on the east. Mr. Pelopon and his cousin read Greek and are reciting pastoral verse."

Kelly drank and nodded, the scale in his head teetering in response to the wine and gentle luff of the curtains, the small bushes now casting shadows on the hill beyond. "Does it make any difference whether you —" he caught himself about to laugh, heavy in the chair which was now too much trouble to rock — "I mean, does reading the *Oresteia* — in English — dilute its —" He did laugh and quickly covered his mouth, but giggled as he tried to apologize.

"That's perfectly all right, Mr. Kelly, it *is* funny in a way — you go right ahead and laugh."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he wheezed, doubling over in the rocker and unable to stop. "I just, it's just that, out there — the two of you, with those sheets — oh God —" He became hysterical for a moment, then recovered; and when he again looked up at them, it was obvious they were not offended. This set him off again, and his head was swimming, each breath somehow heavier than the last. Finally he recovered and tried to focus through his tears. The thought of what he had just done, the sudden image of a mangled child and lamb made him feel quickly terrible, and in a moment he was weeping uncontrollably. "I'm sorry, oh, I am — so sorry." His voice caught and choked, and he felt her arm about him, patting his shoulder as his body shook with each sob.

"It's the drink, Mr. Kelly, something we learned about in Bolivia — perhaps I made it too strong." She was rocking the chair now, and this slowly calmed him, lulling away the hilarity and remorse so that he grew empty and quiet. When he realized the rocking had stopped, with a great effort he looked up and saw them standing together high above him and smiling down. A sense of infinite peace and well being flowed down from them, and he knew it was all true.

"The world must know," he whispered and perhaps they nodded. But they were too far away, and he closed his eyes, helped up by them — amazingly strong, he thought, the strength of the truth — and stretched out in total peace on the couch, the sound of the breeze in the fields flooding him, the odor of soil and growth languorous as his limbs extended, seeming to grow, to lengthen with the coming of dreamless sleep. Their voices came from great distances — pleasant, mingled, evanascent.

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"— Dearest, you know it is."

"I know."

"We thought perhaps goats but we know better."

"I know."

"You just tell Mr. Pelopon and then finish up the *Oresteia*. You always feel better when you read. There's my girl." The click of a kiss, feet shuffling, dancing, it seemed. He imagined music, lutes, harps, small drums and cymbals. And moments later, there was no doubt, none, her voice strong in the fields reading, disappearing in the wind, returning. And from nearby a rhythmic rasp, like an accompaniment, metal to stone, stone to metal. All one, he thought, stretching and certain at last. All one.

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THE LOST ART

It is one thing to be able to make predictions. It is another to listen to the predictions you have made and to act upon them.

For instance (just so that my Gentle Readers will know what I'm talking about) back in 1950, I wrote a short story that was to serve as an introductory section to the first book of the Foundation Trilogy, which was then soon to be published.

In it, the great psychohistorian, Hari Seldon, is about to demonstrate an important point. Here is the passage:

"Seldon removed his calculator pad from the pouch at his belt. Men said he kept one beneath his pillow for use in moments of wakefulness. Its gray glossy finish was slightly worn by use. Seldon's nimble fingers, spotted now with age, played along the hard plastic that rimmed it. Red symbols glowed out from the gray."

There! That's not bad as a prediction of the pocket computer that is now so ubiquitous. I even got the color of the symbols right.

Seven years later, in 1957, I wrote a short story called "The Feeling of Power" in which I described a society in which computers had become so ubiquitous

ISAAC ASIMOV

Science

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that pen-and-paper calculation became a lost art. In the story, my hero claims to have rediscovered the art. He announces that nine times seven is sixty-three. The congressman who hears this doesn't believe it —

"The congressman took out his pocket computer, nudged the milled edges twice, looked at its face as it lay there in the palm of his hand —"

Another prediction of the pocket computer (which, by the way, agreed that nine times seven is sixty-three). I even got the name right.

Another seven years passed and I decided to write a book on the slide rule. I finished it in February 1965. I called it "An Easy Introduction to the Slide Rule," and it was published by Houghton Mifflin toward the end of the year.

But by that time the pocket computers I had myself predicted a decade and a half before were coming into use and growing cheaper every year. In no time at all the use of the slide rule had become a lost art, and my book was lost effort. They don't even *manufacture* slide rules any more. See? I make the prediction and then I don't listen to it.

The slide rule is only a mechanical device for handling logarithms. You can get the same results to more decimal places (albeit more tediously) with a good table of logarithms (or "log table," for short). And now the use of logarithms is a lost art, too.

You might think, then, that it is ridiculous of me, after the fact, to devote space to logarithms. But I'm going to do it anyway, for three reasons:

1) I want to.

2) You might find it interesting. After all, things don't necessarily have to be useful to be interesting.

3) It might come in handy. Suppose you have been stranded on a desert island and the batteries in your pocket computer go dead. If you must then make some complicated computation, you needn't be helpless, provided you understand logarithms. You just chop down a tree and construct a log table.*

Logarithms were invented in 1614 by a Scottish mathematician named Charles Napier, who worked twenty years to perfect the notion. His original motive was to find a method for reducing the load of work required in tedious computations involving certain trigonometric functions called "sines," these computations being important in astronomical work.

A sine is a ratio. In a right triangle, the sine of one of the acute angles

**If any of you cynics out there think I'm writing this article just to get this sentence into print — you may be right.*

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is the ratio of the length of the side opposite the angle to the length of the hypotenuse. Because of this, Napier named the numbers he invented to help in computing these ratios "logarithms" from Greek words meaning "ratio number."

It was only afterward that he realized that logarithms were useful in tedious computations involving *any* numbers. It was not confined to these particular ratios and the word, logarithm, is therefore a misnomer — but we are stuck with it.*

Now that that is clear, let's forget about Napier and make a fresh start.

I think we'll all admit that multiplication and division are much harder than addition and subtraction. Even those prodigies among you who can multiply and divide very quickly and who get the right answer eight or nine times out of ten, and who therefore think it's easy, will have to admit that addition and subtraction are easier still.

If, then, anyone can discover a way of converting a multiplication into an addition, and a division into a subtraction, he deserves the plaudits of the multitude. Actually, it can be done.

Take the problem 8 X 7. This is shorthand for the question "What is the sum of eight 7's?" Since multiplication, in ordinary arithmetic, is commutative, 8 X 7 = 7 X 8, and the latter is shorthand for "What is the sum of seven 8's?"

Either sum is child's play, since 7 + 7 + 7 + 7 + 7 + 7 + 7 + 7= 56, and 8 + 8 + 8 + 8 + 8 + 8 + 8 = 56.

In the same way, the problem 28 ÷ 7 is a shorthand way of saying "How many times can you subtract 7 from 28 before you reach zero?" Since 28 - 7 - 7 - 7 - 7 = 0, the clear answer is 28 ÷ 7 = 4.

Of course, if you had as your problem 30 ÷ 7, you are in a quandary. Subtract four 7's and you haven't reached 0; subtract five 7's and you've passed 0. The answer is to get as close to 0 as you can, without passing it and then subtract whatever number is required to get you to zero. Thus, 30 - 7 - 7 - 7 - 7 - 2 = 0. You can then say that 30 ÷ 7 = 4, with 2 left over; or, with a little more sophistication of notation 30 ÷ 7 = 4-2/7.

Fine! We have now converted multiplication into addition and division into subtraction, and we are happy as can be — as long as we stay with small numbers.

**When I was young, I came across the following riddle: Why is a woodcutter's ball like a mathematics textbook? — The answer is: Because both are full of logger rhythms.*

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What happens though if we want to solve 3498 X 729. Adding three thousand four hundred ninety-eight 729's, or seven hundred twenty-nine 3498's is going to be a terrible chore and I, for one, refuse to tackle it. Trying to do 75,643 ÷ 803 by the subtraction method is even worse.

So, as a matter of fact, schoolchildren are not taught to multiply and divide by adding and subtracting. They are, instead taught the multiplication and division of small numbers by drill and brute memory. The average youngster knows that 7 X 8 = 56 and that 28 ÷ 7 = 4 simply because he has memorized all the multiplications from 0 X 0 to perhaps as high as 12 X 12, and all the divisions from 144 ÷ 12 to 0 ÷ 1. (Sometimes he even remembers some of the multiplications and divisions into adult life.)

Then, for higher numbers still, the youngster learns various tricks that involve the simple memorized products and quotients together with a mixed bag of indenting and carrying numbers that not one child in a hundred knows the reasons for. You just learn it as a fixed set of rules like those involved in driving a car, with this difference — no one who learns how to drive a car ever forgets how.

Next, let's start all over again with something that may seem to have nothing to do with the problem. We'll write a series of numbers beginning with 2, and doubling it each time, thus: 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256, 512, 1024, 2048, 4096, 8192... You can continue it as far as you like.

This series has an interesting property. Suppose you multiply any two numbers in the series, or for that matter any number in that series by itself, thus: 8 X 32 = 256, or 64 X 64 = 4096. You'll notice that the products, 256 and 4096, are also members of the series. This is always true! You can try as many examples as you wish. All multiplications of numbers in the series (involving, two, three, or any finite number) will end by giving you a product which is a member of the series — if you extend the series far enough.

The series we have constructed is, in other words, "closed to multiplication."

Why is this so? If we write the series in another fashion, the answer becomes obvious. The first number of the series is 2; the second number is twice the first or 2 X 2 (which is 4). The third number is twice the second of 2 X 2 X 2 (which is 8). The fourth number is twice the third or 2 X 2 X 2 X 2 (which is 16). And so on forever.

If we write the series as multiples of 2, we have it become: 2; 2 X 2; 2 X 2 X 2; 2 X 2 X 2 X 2; 2 X 2 X 2 X 2 X 2...

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This is an infinite series made up of every number in existence from 2 on up that can be constructed by multiplying 2's. Any number that can be so constructed is on the list somewhere.

If, then we want to solve 8 X 32, and write it as multiples of 2, we are trying to work out (2 X 2 X 2) X (2 X 2 X 2 X 2 X 2). The answer is 2 X 2 X 2 X 2 X 2 X 2 X 2 X 2, or 256. The product, being a product of 2's is inevitably part of the series. Multiply any product of a given number of 2's by any other product of a given number of 2's and the overall product is *still* a product of a given number of 2's.

Notice, also, that in the problem we have just considered, 8 X 32 = 256, the product of three 2's multiplied by the product of five 2's, gave an overall product that is the product of eight 2's. You may be multiplying the products, but you're *adding* (3 + 5 = 8) the number of 2's being multiplied.

This becomes clearer and more useful if we stop trying to write all the 2's, since that is not only messy but it makes it easy to miss count and make mistakes. Instead let's write the multiplication of two 2's as 2^2, of three 2's as 2^3, of four 2's as 2^4 and so on. The 2 written in the ordinary fashion is the "base," and the smaller number to the upper right is the "exponent." A number like 2^4 is an "exponential number."

The number 2^2 is usually read "2 square" and 2^3 is read "2 cube." From there on in, we say "2 to the 4th power," "2 to the 5th power" and so on. My own feeling is that it would be much better to drop the "square" and "cube," which go back to the geometric predilections of the ancient Greeks and make the notation uniform by speaking of "2 to the 2nd power" and "2 to the 3rd power."

The number 2 itself is just one 2, and you can't really speak of the "multiplication of one 2," but for uniformity's sake, you might as well write 2 as 2^1, if you wish to put it into exponential form, and call it "2 to the 1st power."

Our original series: 2, 4, 8, 16, 32.... can therefore be written, instead, as 2^1, 2^2, 2^3, 2^4, 2^5... You have to admit that using exponential numbers is a neater way of presenting the series.

Instead of writing 8 X 32 = 256, then, we could write the problem exponentially, as $2^3 \times 2^5 = 2^8$. Notice again that although we are multiplying 2^3 and 2^5, we *are* adding the exponents, 3 and 5.

Suppose we prepare a table such as Table 1.

Using Table 1, it would be very easy to solve a problem such as 256 X

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Table 1

Number	*Exponent (to the base 2)*
2	1
4	2
8	3
16	4
32	5
64	6
128	7
256	8
512	9
1024	10
2048	11
4096	12
8192	13
and so on	and so on

8192. Using the table (which we can imagine being extended to huge numbers in the trillions of trillions) we would find that for 256, the exponent to the base 2 is 8 and for 8192 it is 13.

Instead of multiplying, we would simply add the exponents: $8 + 13 = 21$. We would then use the table to find the exponent 21, and look to the left to see the number it represents. That number is 2,097,152. We therefore would know that $256 \times 8192 = 2{,}097{,}152$.

As it happens, in tables such as Table 1, the right hand column is not usually labelled "Exponent (to the base 2)," but "Logarithm (to the base 2)." This is pure semantics. A logarithm *is* an exponent, and I'm sorry Napier invented the word. Now both words exist and add to the confusion in the world. The left hand column in Table 1 can be headed "antilogarithm" rather than "number." (To save syllables I will speak of logs and antilogs.)

Thus we can say "$\log_2 4 = 2$" (or "the log of 4 to the base 2 is 2). Similarly "$\log_2 8 = 3$", "$\log_2 16 = 4$" and so on indefinitely. What we have done in multiplying 256 and 8192 is to make use of a log table.

Can we also divide by using exponents (or logs)? Suppose you want to divide 64 by 16. It works out to $64 \div 16 = 4$ or, in exponential notation, $2^6 \div 2^4 = 2^2$.

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We can see at a glance that division seems to be involved with the subtraction of exponents, which is no surprise since division is the opposite of multiplication. If multiplication involves the addition of exponents, then division *should* involve the subtraction of exponents.

Suppose, then, we try to solve the following problem: 8,388,608 ÷ 524,288. We can look up the logarithms in Table 1 (assuming it to be extended to large enough figures), and find that $\log_2 8{,}388{,}608 = 23$ and $\log_2 524{,}288 = 19$. We subtract logs — 23-19 = 4 — and that means the answer is that number whose log to the base 2 is 4. That number is 16, since $\log_2 16 = 4$ as Table 1 tells us (if we haven't already memorized the fact). Now we know that 8,388,608 ÷ 524,288 = 16, and all we've done is use a log table and subtract. No division at all.

But division isn't quite that easy. The series of numbers that includes all those made up of 2's multiplied together is closed to multiplication in that *any* number in the series, multiplied by *any other* in the series, yields a product that is also a number in the series. This is not true the other way around; the series as I have given it is *not* closed to division.

For instance 4 ÷ 4 = 1, and though 4 is a member of the series, 1 is not. Again 2 ÷ 16 = 1/8, and though both 2 and 16 are members of the series, 1/8 is not.

Suppose, then, we extend the series. We had started arbitrarily with 2 and had then kept doubling and redoubling to build up larger and larger numbers without limit. But if we are going to be limitless at one end, why not limitless at the other?

Suppose we start at 2 again and this time halve and halve again to produce smaller and smaller numbers? Thus, 2, 1, 1/2, 1/4, 1/8, 1/16, 1/32, 1/64... and so on endlessly.

The new series, working both ways from 2, would be endless in both directions and the central part of it would look like this if we move from the very small on the left to the very large on the right: ...1/64, 1/32, 1/16, 1/8, 1/4, 1/2, 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64...

Such an extended series is closed to *both* multiplication and division. Thus 1/8 X 1/4 = 1/32 and 8 ÷ 32 = 1/4 and 1/4 ÷ 1/16 = 4 and 2 x 4 ÷ 16 x 1/2 ÷ 1/8 = 2, and so on. You can take any finite number of numbers from the extended series, with or without repetition, and make use of any finite number of multiplications and divisions involving them, and the result will always remain a member of the series.

The next step is to work out exponential notation for the extended series.

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If we grant that $4 = 2^2$ and $2 = 2^1$, what is 1 equal to in exponential notation? Well, $4 \div 4$ or $2 \div 2$ (or, for that matter, any number divided by itself) is equal to 1. That means that $2^2 \div 2^2 = 1$ or $2^1 \div 2^1 = 1$ (as does any other exponential number divided by itself). If division involves the subtraction of exponents, then $2^2 \div 2^2 = 2^0$, since $2 - 2 = 0$, and this is true for any exponential number divided by itself.

The only way a particular division can have two different answers,* is when the two different answers are really the same, so that we must define 2^0 as being equal to 1. This doesn't *seem* to make sense since 2^0 would appear to mean zero 2's multiplied together and that sounds, intuitively, as though it should equal zero. However, to keep exponential notation self-consistent (and the great basic rule in mathematics is that any mathematical system must be self-consistent) 2^0 must be set equal to 1.

Then, what about 1/2? Since $4 \div 8 = 1/2$, then $2^2 \div 2^3 = 1/2$. By subtracting exponents, we find that $2^2 \div 2^3 = 2^{-1}$. Therefore $1/2 = 2^{-1}$. Working similarly, we find that $1/4 = 2^{-2}$, $1/8 = 2^{-3}$, $1/16 = 2^{-4}$ and so on.

There seems to be a symmetry here, and that is always a good thing to find in mathematics. Thus $1/2 = 1/2^1 = 2^{-1}$; $1/4 = 1/2^2 = 2^{-2}$; $1/8 = 1/2^3 = 2^{-3}$. Such symmetries help assure one that the system makes sense.

Now, then, we can make an extended log table as in Table 2.

Using Table 2, we can multiply and divide freely by adding and subtracting logs as long as we stick to the numbers in the series.

But (and it's an awfully big "but") it *only* works for numbers in the series, and those numbers in the series are only a vanishingly small fraction of all the numbers there are.

For instance, from 1 to 100 there are only seven whole numbers, 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, and 64, that are members of the series, while there are ninety-three numbers that are not. If we choose any two numbers from 1 to 100, we have a possible total of ten thousand combinations that can be multiplied or divided, and only forty-nine of those combinations will be soluble by the logs to the base 2. That's only about one out of two hundred, and the situation grows worse as the numbers grow larger. The same is also true of unit fractions (those with 1 in the numerator).

Now what do we do?

**Please don't write to tell me that any number divided by 0 has an infinite number of different answers. It is for this very reason that division by zero is excluded in mathematics.*

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Suppose we try other numbers as the base for a series. We might start with 3 and multiply it by three over and over to get larger and larger numbers, then divide it by three over and over to get smaller and smaller numbers. We would end up with a series like this: ...1/729, 1/243, 1/81, 1/9, 1/3, 1, 3, 9, 81, 243, 729....

This could be written: ...3^{-5}, 3^{-4}, 3^{-3}, 3^{-2}, 3^{-1}, 3^{0}, 3^{1}, 3^{2}, 3^{3}, 3^{4}, 3^{5}...

We could use this to get a table of logarithms to the base 3. This would give us a whole series of numbers that are not located on the 2 series. (Except for 1, that is, which is common to all such series. After all, $3^{0} = 1$

Table 2

Antilog	*Log to the base 2*
.	.
.	.
.	.
.	.
1/256	-8
1/128	-7
1/64	-6
1/32	-5
1/16	-4
1/8	-3
1/4	-2
1/2	-1
1	0
2	1
4	2
8	3
16	4
32	5
64	6
128	7
256	8
.	.
.	.
.	.
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just as $2^0 = 1$, and by the same reasoning. Indeed, *any* number to the zeroth power is equal to 1.)

We might go higher still. There's no use using 4 as a base because that's one of the numbers in the 2 series, and if we start with 4 and multiply it over and over again by 4, we end up with a series, all members of which are included in the 2 series — 4, 16, 64, 256, 1024, and so on. (I'll leave it to you to see how it works in the other direction, through 1 and unit fractions.)

We can, however, use 5, 6, 7 as bases to give us new numbers that are on none of the other series. Just considering the whole numbers, there are 5, 25, 125, 625... and 6, 36, 216, 1296.... and 7, 49, 343, 2401... In exponential notation, these are, respectively, 5^1, 5^2, 5^3, 5^4...., 6^1, 6^2, 6^3, 6^4...., and 7^1, 7^2, 7^3, 7^4... (Again, I'll leave it to you to see how it works in the other direction through 1 and unit fractions.)

There's no use trying 8 or 9 as a base, since the former is present in the 2 series and the latter in the 3 series, but you can go on to 10, 11, 12, 13, 14 and so on for additional series.

If you make an infinite number of such series, then every whole number and every unit fraction is on one series or another (and numbers which are not unit fractions, like 2/7, or mixed numbers like 3-2/7 — every rational number, in fact — can always be dealt with as a combination of a multiplication and division of whole numbers).

Of course, using an infinite number of series to make sure you can find every number is not really practical. On the other hand, may a finite number, say several dozen, do for all numbers between 1/100 and 100, perhaps?

No it won't!

There's another catch. We can't mix series. For instance, suppose we want to solve 8 X 9, to which we know the answer is 72. The number 8 is equal to 2^3 and the number 9 to 3^2. Can we add exponents? Suppose we consider $2^3 \times 3^2$. We know that $3 + 2 = 5$, but is the answer, then, 2^5 or 3^5?

Neither! It turns out that $2^5 = 32$ and $3^5 = 243$, and neither is even close to 72. We can't even split the difference in bases and suspect that $2^3 \times 3^2 = 2.5^5$, since $2.5 \times 2.5 \times 2.5 \times 2.5 \times 2.5 = 97.65625$ and that isn't 72, either.

The conclusion we must come to is that you can't mix series of numbers in using logs. You can't combine logs to a particular base with logs to another base and come out with a correct answer. *You must stick with a*

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particular base and never veer from it, if you are to get any correct answers at all. Well, then, which base?

I've already said that the 2-series gives you only a small fraction of the numbers you are likely to encounter, so it's no good. Yet the 3-series gives you fewer numbers still and the 5-series still fewer. The higher the base you use to build a series, the fewer the numbers you will include on that series over a given stretch.

For instance, between 1 and 1000 the 2-series gives you ten numbers: 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 128, 256 and 512. The 12-series give you only three numbers: 1, 12, 144. The next number in the 12-series is already 1728. The 33-series gives you only two numbers, 1 and 33, for the next number in the series is already 1089. So although the 2 series is imperfect, it is less imperfect than any of the other series. Can we use something smaller than 2 as a base and get more numbers?

We can't use either 1 or 0 base because 1 to any power is 1, and 0 to any power is 0. (Try it: 1 x 1 x 1.... or 0 x 0 x 0....) The series would therefore be: 1, 1, 1, 1... or 0, 0, 0, 0... and either would be useless. Negative numbers would give you the same series as the positive numbers except that with negative numbers you would alternate between positive numbers and negative numbers, thus: -2, 4, -8, 16, -32, 64 and so on.

What about fractions? Suppose we start with 1.1 and keep multiplying by 1.1. We would have 1.1, 1.21, 1.331, 1.4641, 1.61051 and so on. This gives us a lot of decimal numbers and fills in the space between whole numbers as no whole number series could. We would even get more if we used 1.01, still more if we used 1.001 and so on.

However, whatever base we use, and however small the interval between successive numbers in the series, there are always myriads of numbers omitted for every one included, and the situation always gets worse and worse as you get up the scale. No matter how small the base, you will always get to places where you are skipping dozens of whole numbers — hundreds — thousands — millions — with each step.

Unless you can somehow fill in the intervals between successive terms in a series, no series will be useful. However, the intervals *can* be filled in, you will be glad to hear, so that we can, if we wish, use any series for the purpose, basing our choice on any grounds that we want to use.

As it turns out there are only two series that anyone uses, and the more common of these — the one on which the slide-rule is based — is the 10-series. Why the 10-series? Because it fits our number system beautifully — as I will show you next month.

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Here is a fast-paced arctic adventure about a hunter who goes after a huge polar bear and runs into a completely different kind of danger.

Bearings

by EDWARD WELLEN

Prologue

It was the long night. The polar ice pack had set in against the coast, sealing earth and sea — and almost air — fast in a solid sheet of white. The bear hugged the whiteness. The wind ruffled the bear's thick new winter coat. The bear lay still, his paw over his black nose and eyes making him one with the whiteness.

He had scraped the snow away from the breathing hole of a ringed seal and now lay in wait. The seal must surface every ten minutes to breathe. The bear had packed all the breathing holes he could find, all but this one. Even so, odds were the seal would not surface here soon. The seal would have gnawed many breathing holes throughout his range and in need could make use of his fellows'.

But for the bear time had no meaning. He had crossed into tomorrow without knowing it. The bear waited. Hours or days later the seal would surface at the hole and blow. The bear's stillness would end.

A swipe of the right paw would crush the seal's skull, left paw and teeth would pull the seal up through the hole, a tight squeeze that could extrude the seal's guts. The bear would eat, the seal's fatness become his. Once full, the bear would feel sleep creep upon him. He would find a place in the lee of an ice ridge or tread a pit in the snow. He would dream the dream he dreamt now of dreaming. He would dream seal in plenty.

But now something stirred in the bear's head, weaving it in a dreamy reality of bewilderment. He lifted up on all fours and then on hind twos and raised his nose to the wind.

He smelled warm seal blubber.

Though it had the thinning of thirty kilometers, the smell took

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him from the breathing hole. It drew him off the sea and pulled him inland. He followed the silent call though his seal-killing program told him inland held small chance of seal.

Minutes later, a seal surfaced at the hole and blew, luxuriated in the absence of bear, then took ten minutes' air back down under the ice to fish.

An arctic fox, following the bear to eat his leavings and paw out the undigested matter in the bear's stool, followed a while, then turned away to hunt a more sensible bear to follow.

The long night lay in wait.

1

Neil Benthorn started as the Cessna 185 swung around into the wind. He shoved his cuff back and pressed the stud for the readout of his wristwatch-compass's inertial guidance crystal. He frowned at the pilot.

"The locator says we're still on the safe side of longitude."

Bob Artisarlook kept his eyes on his instruments. He eased the plane down.

"This is as far as I go. It's farther than I ought to go."

Neil's better judgment agreed. Its still small voice had its own readout: *Turn back.* He grinned at Bob.

"Well, if this is the best you can do, okay. Thanks for this much."

With a sour half-smile on his doughy half-face Bob nodded.

"I still think you're a nutcase."

Neil put mock anger in his voice. "Fine thing to say now. You knew my weakness. You shouldn't've told me about the bear."

Bob waved at the whiteout.

"I'm a nutcase too or I wouldn't be flying in a milk bottle."

Both knew the worse the weather, the better. The whiteout would have grounded the Soviet patrol planes. Neil eyed Bob and felt warmth. Bob wasn't doing it for the money. Any more than Neil was doing it for the bear.

Sure, Neil meant to bag the bear, but it was the hunt not the kill that gave him his kicks. Same went for Bob; much as he bitched about it, flying gave him his high.

Neil turned his head but not his eyes away from Bob's face. He hated to have Bob catch him staring though Bob seemed never to mind. Bob was one of the best but it happened even to the best. Maybe because they were the best. Because they went out and put their lives on the line.

In his early days as a bush pilot, one of the first Eskimo bush pilots, Bob had lost an ear and part of his face to frostbite. A crack-up had knocked him out and bared him enough long enough for the damage to take place. But he had made

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his way back on foot. Told you something about the man.

They had got to know each other as well as you could get to know someone you spent a month roughing it with. A hard month, Bob piloting him all over the North Slope to shoot all the trouble the consortium had sent him up here to shoot.

The name of the game was oil, and oil fueled haste and waste as need sparked greed. He had speeded up the laying of the new superflow pipeline. He had leaned on the subcontractors. He had buttered up the union bosses. He had reminded the governor that oil royalties were bailing Alaska out and had got the green light to lay pipe across a fault, using honeycomb to absorb earth movements and prevent whip action in the line.

But nothing remained to absorb his energy now that he had done what he had come to do and had a week to spare. Loaded for bear — and no bear. The damn eco-freaks had made real hunting, meaningful hunting, satisfying hunting, impossible in Alaska. He had resigned himself to returning to the Lower 48 without having gone after the big one.

And then Bob had stood the whalebone carving on the dayroom table. Bob looked half-embarrassed. "A going-away present."

The polar bear reared twice as tall as the Eskimo facing it. Even in miniature it looked huge.

"Carved from life. Man's a cousin of mine on Little Diomede. Saw the bear close up and shaped this. Biggest bear anybody ever saw. More'n twelve feet long. Must go better than a ton."

Neil figured aloud. "Take a .375 magnum rifle, 250-300-grain bullet."

"Take more'n that. Take a disregard of the law. Polar bear's an endangered species, no longer a trophy animal." Bob shrugged. "Besides, last I heard he crossed the line into Siberia."

Neil worked himself up into tropic heat. "I hate these antigun freaks. They're still hopped up about Peter Rabbit. Never was a rabbit that was Peter Rabbit. And Smokey Bear. Smokey Bear was an actor's voice. Animals are animals, not pet names. And, by God, we're animals too and have to listen to our animal nature. It's Cain who peopled the earth but there's still some Abel in the genes. If we had listened to the antihunting freaks way back, we'd still be cowering in the caves — that's if we could've nerved ourselves to dispossess the cave bears in the first place. We've always had the do-gooders with us, slowing us down, holding us back. The shark drowns if he sits still."

Neil heard his own harshness and felt himself redden at his own

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savagery. It rushed into his mind that he had been the kind of kid they picked last or next-to-last when they chose up sides. Butterfingers. Or was it margarine for error? Margarine had been the Benthorn family spread; butter was something he tasted for the first time when he was in his teens and eating at a friend's house. Anyway, the line of least resistance had led to the supportive blinders of bookishness. No doubt he would be today a college professor or something of the sort. But his folks had slammed the books shut and shoved him into little-league baseball. Now he thanked them for that. Any kid who survived that rite of passage was all right. The best dancers were all once weak-ankled kids. And he had got good at sports, had done well in a dog-eat-dog world.

He fixed on the whalebone bear and knew his fate and the bear's were one. Ours.

"I'm going after him."

Bob raised the one eyebrow. But here they were, coming around again for the landing after the pass for an eyeball examination of the ice.

The Cessna 185 touched down smoothly and stopped well short of a hummock. Bob did not waste time taking satisfaction in the nice landing. He set a fast tempo though he had landed them far north of the watchtower on the cliffs of Big Diomede, a.k.a. Ratmanov. They unlashed and unshipped the snowmobile swiftly, and Bob was back at the controls and shouting into the white wind.

"Meet you here six days from now."

Neil returned the thumbs-up sign. He watched the plane take off and mist away as its sound misted away in the wind.

He looked around the stakeless plain. The sight alone was enough to make you shiver. He shivered, an icicle of alarm driving into his brain. He had failed to store his position. At these latitudes there was a limit on the mistakes you could make.

In a fumble of mittens he found and pressed the STO button, entering his present coordinates in the compass's memory. Here was where he had to be six days from now when Bob came back to pick him up — with or without the bear. Now here was where he would be then, the intertia-sensing crystal allowing for every move he made away from the spot and pointing him back to the spot. His face tightened with cold resolve. It would be with the bear.

He looked to his gun before he got in, made sure it was fast to the supports behind the Sno-Go cab of the snowmobile. He was carrying it unloaded and encased; in that much he was being an ethical hunt-

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er. And he would turn the machine off when he reached the hunt area and not use it in the actual hunt.

But first to turn it on. Before he touched the ignition switch, he checked the throttle to make sure it would return to the closed position, not freeze in the open position. Good; moisture hadn't collected and frozen in the cable. He switched on.

He tickled the throttle and felt the surge as he worked the sled around. Its racing-type chassis mounted two 795-cc. engines. The sound was like the rattle of game birds breaking cover. He jammed the throttle full open and felt the front of his machine rise as the cleats dug in and hurtled him over the ice. Even with the muffler, the snowmobile racketed — so loud he squinted through the noise. He cut through the air at 80 klicks. Step on the exhilarator. Two hours by snowmobile equaled a full day by dog team. No wonder the Eskimos felt it was worth growing hard of hearing. He sat well back; keeping weight to the rear gave greater traction and made for lighter steering. He held the handlebars firmly; when the snowmobile hit a bump, he would not lose control.

Without looking at his coordinates readout, he knew he had crossed the invisible line. His exhilaration decelerated. Not too late to turn around and head back to his own side of the line. Camp till it was nearly time for Bob to pick him up, then make the meet. Not even Bob would know he had chickened out. No one would know.

Wrong. Neil Benthorn would know.

He held his course, clipped along. He crossed Bering Strait on a chord of the Arctic Circle, making for the site — Bob had mysteriously got word from his cousins on Little Diomede who had mysteriously got word from their cousins on Chukchi Peninsula — of the latest sighting of the bear.

Neil gazed at the overcast for a sky map of what lay ahead. The uneven white of pressure ridges below the horizon showed above as a mottled patch. A darkening of the sky showed him he was nearing land.

Way back, the Amerinds' forebears hadn't needed a land bridge. During the half year when the Bering Sea froze, you could walk across.

Not that the going was all smooth. He had to round hummocks and cross patches of brash where larger bodies of ice had rubbed together. He had to steer clear of steam ahead where leads of open water lurked. The sun had made its noon appearance and bowed out. Long blue shadows added menace to the merest uplifting of ice. Whenever he came up on

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anything that looked out of the way, he let go of the throttle and coasted to a stop. This saved his brakes for real need. The trickiest, because last and least spotted, were drifts of snow in lees of sea ice. The wind had beaten the snow hard, still the purchase differed enough to threaten loss of control if it caught you off-guard. Times he had to sway against the machine, leaning in the opposite direction to keep it from tipping over.

He drove on through the night. The wind had swept the sky clear for the stars and a half-moon. He had hunted at night in woods and meadows and was finding the seeing better on a cold clear midwinter night with stars and a half-moon on sea ice — which, because of its stickiness, was not glare ice — than on a fall night with a full moon on greenery. He didn't need the snowmobile's headlights.

It seemed dreamstuff, the dark unreality and himself tearing through it. All the more cause to stay wakeful.

He had reached the mush belt, where the floes of the pack, still answering the shove of a now-dead gale at two klicks, were grinding against the landfast ice and each other. Times he had to wait for the dreamily slow spin to close leads, then make his dash before they dreamily reopened.

At such waits, with the engines idling, he heard the squeal of ice sliding over ice and felt the shiver of pressure ridges in the making.

Then one last dash and he had made it to land. The rough coordinates Bob had given him were quick in coming up. He didn't spot the bear but he hadn't counted on spotting the bear right off. That would've been too much good luck. Or bad luck; sight and sound of the snowmobile would've sent the bear racing away, warned him of man, made him hard to lure. Now the hunt would be a true hunt.

The land had a molting motley look, dark patches where wind had swept all the snow away, amber where bleached grass stuck up through the snow. Dwarf spruce thinly dotted the waste of tundra muskeg. As a scatter diagram of itself it had a high correlation to nothingness.

Neil parked the snowmobile in the lee of a hillock. He stored the cache in his compass's memory; it took an unmittened hand to do this without erasing the earlier setting — his rendezvous point with Bob. He held out his bare hand. Dry as his hand was, a cloud as big as his hand rose from his palm and steam wisped from his fingers. It had to be fifty below or below. He quickly mittened his hand. He shouldered his pack.

He uncased his rifle, loaded it, and slung it on. He slung on his two

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pairs of field glasses — the twelve-power for identifying what the six-power picked up. His skiing goggles had three sets of lenses — clear for night, yellow for overcast, dark for sunshine. If all went well he would need only the first. Quick in and quick out was his hope.

In his hooded one-piece fleece-lined snowmobile suit, two sets of thermal underwear, face mask, mukluks, and mitts, he was his own home away from home.

He hiked a good piece away from the man-smell of the machine, looking for a place of ambush, his crackling breath and his crackling boots breaking the vast silence.

In spite of the ski mask and the hood, the wind drove a nail of coldness into his brow. He grimaced to see if part of his face had stiffened. He found a frostbitten spot. He knew it would look white if he could see it. He unmittened his hand and pressed it to the frozen spot for a few moments till the stiffness had gone. Better find that place of ambush now, get out of the wind.

He stopped at the first sizable hummock. Top of that should do. Harder for a wounded bear to charge uphill, and if the bear was the size Bob said it was, it could do a lot of charging before the right shot finished him off.

At the foot of the hummock Neil grounded his pack, took out a Sterno can and the tin can full of seal fat bob had given him, lifted the plastic lid off the tin, and set the blubber bubbling and stinking over the Sterno flame. Neil made a face, not testing for frostbite. If the bear was within 40 klicks, that ought to make him come and get it.

Neil slipped a spare mitten over the front end of his rifle barrel to keep snow from getting in when climbing the slope or crawling up on the bear. Carrying his pack, he scrambled up the hummock. The bear could be nearer than he thought. He settled himself where the smoke would not impair his view and the smell would not insult his nose.

From time to time he used his six-power glasses. He held the glasses a little way away from his eyes to keep eye moisture from clouding and frosting the instrument. For the same reason he wore mittens when holding the glasses. He tried to have the wind at right angles so it would blow the moisture away before it reached a surface to condense on. From time to time he grimaced and searched his face for frostbite. He did not wait to feel numbness, much less wait to feel pain.

He waited for the bear. To keep his energy up he let squares of chocolate melt in his mouth. No pills for him. He had always feared loss of control; life could become a wildly overshooting and under-

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shooting seesaw once you took to uppers and downers.

Dawn wind thickened ground drift into a white blur. The seal fat had rendered itself up and there was no more, though the stink hung on. Then the bear shaped itself out of the white blur.

Moving slowly to move silently, Neil unmuzzled his rifle of the mitten. He would not have to crawl up on the bear. Right where it loomed it presented a perfect target. Without taking his eyes off the bear he chambered the first round.

Even allowing for the distortion of ground drift, the bear loomed huge. Neil could put himself in the place of the Eskimo in the carving Bob had given him, which meant he'd do his damnedest to keep his distance till the bear lay dead.

Which would be soon. But not till he had watched the bear at its height of life and power. While the fat drew the bear nearer to his fire, the twelve-power glasses drew the bear even further in. His grunt of awe at the size of the bear clouded the lenses the bear filled. Too, he had the shock of feeling that the bear stared straight back at him, a feeling that grew as the bear grew coming on.

Reason told Neil the bear's eyes nowhere near matched the bear's nose and the bear's nose had fixed on the seal fat not on Neil. Still, Neil lowered the glasses and took up the rifle and got the bear in his sights.

But now, just as Neil set himself to fire, the bear began to caper.

It chased itself around and around in a tight circle so clownishly that the thought rushed into Neil's mind this was a circus animal on the loose. Neil gaped and his trigger finger went slack. Then the bear reared tall and, no longer a clown, struck savage blows at the air. For a moment Neil thought he understood. Flies, or some other insect pest. But this wasn't the season. And, in any case, what the bear did next exterminated the pest theory. It laid itself down to sleep.

Surely some madness was on the bear. But what had brought it on *now?*

His neck hairs lifted. It fell to below fifty below in his spine. He turned his head slowly.

While the bear had held Neil with its antics, someone had climbed the reverse slope of the hummock. Someone bulky as a bear in white Soviet Army coveralls over winter wear. And now, while Neil's mind still whirled, the man stood holding Neil in the cold eye of a Kalashnikov, an AK-47.

Neil slowly turned his head bearward again. Another figure had come up behind the bear and stood confidently but concernedly over the sleeping bear.

Again a flash of understanding.

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The Soviets had dropped the bear with a tranquilizer gun.

"Kak familya?"

His captor's voice brought Neil around again. Neil didn't know the words but he knew the meaning.

Time for him to explain himself.

2

He was a harmless businessman. His ID would bear him out. They had caught him dead to rights taking a bead on the bear. That he would own up to, and to having unwittingly strayed across the line in pursuit of the bear. True, sometimes businessmen were spies, but spies did not infiltrate in order to hunt bear. He felt sure he could talk his way out of this if these people — or if they took him to their leader, their leader — spoke English. He had stumbled upon a scientific mission. That would not be as bad as stumbling upon a military mission.

"My name is Neil Benthorn. Sorry if I almost spoiled something."

The man smiled. "You have spoiled nothing."

Good on two counts. English-speaking and nonseriousness.

The man moved nearer and Neil saw more of the face under the hood. The man had hard-boiled eyes and white eyelashes. And the more Neil saw of the smile, the less he liked it. It was a smile the man might use to tighten his jawline for shaving. There seemed that little feeling behind it. All the same, it looked a trap-steel smile. And the Kalashnikov had not lowered.

"I only meant I didn't know anyone would be out here tagging bears."

"'Tagging'?" The man frowned with as little feeling, then returned to the smile. "Ah, *tagging*. Yes, we play and bear is It."

The man was playing with him. Neil's jawline tightened. With feeling. He felt thankful for the feelingless ski mask.

"You know what I mean. You tranquilized the bear, didn't you?"

As he spoke, it flashed on him his earlier flash had been wrong. He hadn't heard the shot. Even an air gun would have made an audible pop, explosive in the great silence. Did they have a new weapon and was this a military mission after all?

The smile stayed in place. "Tranquilized the bear, you say. Watch. I will show you how tranquil is the bear. I will make for you the bear and the Zhid to dance. Watch and do not move."

The man held the gun on Neil with one hand while the other hand drew a small black box from a breast pocket. He nodded for Neil to watch the bear and the one he called the Zhid.

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Suddenly the bear stirred. The Zhid, bending over it, palpating its head with an unmittened hand, drew the hand back as from flame. He shot a misty-lensed glance Neil's way; then, as the bear climbed to its feet and shook the heaviness from its head, he gave his full attention to the bear.

Slowly the Zhid stepped backward a pace, two paces, three. The bear fixed on him. The Zhid stopped. Then, as the bear made no move, the Zhid took another step backward.

Neil heard a faint click from the black box. The bear reared twice as tall as the Zhid. The Zhid backpedaled quickly, tripped over his own feet, fell, and lay looking up at the towering bear. The Zhid's face turned from the bear to the man with the black box. The Zhid said everything in silence.

Neil turned his head. Life had come to the man's eyes, a laugh gave content to the smile. Then the man's face flickered and he spoke to himself.

"Na huya."

He thumbed the black box and with its click the bear froze. It might have been a carving of itself. Another click and the bear folded and fell again into its sleep. The Zhid rolled out from under it barely in time. The man pocketed the black box.

The Kalashnikov prodded the air, gesturing Neil down the slope toward the bear and the Zhid.

"Davai. Go on."

Neil rose stiffly and moved slowly to keep from giving a stumbling semblance of flight.

"Bistro, bistro. Hurry up down. Ruki nazad. Hands behind back."

Neil followed orders and the man followed Neil, picking up Neil's rifle in passing. The Zhid had got to his feet and stood gazing down at the bear and absently powdering himself off. Neil noticed a crown of baseball stitches and crusted blood on the bear's head.

The Zhid looked up at their coming, his eyes and face careful blanks.

The voice behind Neil stopped Neil. "Let me introduce. My comrade Moisei Davidov, who was nearly It. Please excuse... *Doctor* Moisei Davidov. And this is Mr. Neil Benthorn, who, as the phrase books say, has come calling."

The man with the AK-47 unzipped the throat of his coverall to show uniform and epaulets. A touch of purple.

"As to myself, I am Col. Pyotr Semenov. Welcome to Operation Medved', Mr. Benthorn. FYI, medved' means bear. As you see, it is literally an operation. A study in mind control of animals. As to its aim, I assure you that you will find out in good time. Meanwhile" — he slapped his shoulder with his free

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hand and stamped his feet — "let us get out of outdoors."

Col. Semenov nodded. Moisei started off in the nod's direction. Neil followed, wondering if Moisei Davidov was as much a prisoner as himself, as much under control as the bear.

Neil's face felt stiff. Hands behind his back, he could not make sure by touch it was merely the stiffness of rage at himself for getting himself in this bind. He grimaced but felt no telling numbness. He grimaced again. Frostbite had to be the least, or at least the least pressing, of his cares.

They filed across the iron-hard muck, making toward a lichened hummock. Several times Moisei turned to look back at and back of Neil, then faced forward and paced on. Moisei Davidov too was not his most pressing care. It was Col. Semenov he had to disarm, and no word or move Neil could think of seemed likely to work. Unless he could somehow use Davidov against Semenov?

As they neared the hummock, Neil grew aware the air vibrated. And as he followed Moisei around the hummock, he found a military chopper keeping itself warm.

The chopper pilot, spotting the stranger marching meditatively behind the Zhid, opened his door and held his AK-47 machine pistol at the ready, then, seeing Col. Semenov swing into sight, relaxed.

Neil glanced behind. The colonel had not lost or gained a millimeter.

"Don't worry, Mr. Benthorn. You have not lost me."

Neil looked past the colonel. His eyes widened to take in the bear. The bear followed the colonel, stalking with heavy grace. Neil thrust his jaw bearward.

"The bear. Medved'."

Col. Semenov didn't break stride or whirl to see. He smiled his smile.

"Really. I feel shame for you, Mr. Benthorn."

Neil shrugged and faced forward. Maybe the colonel knew what he was doing; he had the black box, after all. All Neil knew was, black box or no black box, he would not like the bear to follow him.

But now as the bear rounded the hummock after the colonel and came in view, the chopper pilot yelled in Russian, pointed, and leveled his AK-47.

Col. Semenov, in swift downspiral of whirlcrouch, brought his own weapon to bear. Then he as quickly lowered his gun and put a hand out to forestall the pilot. He worked the black box out of his pocket. But the bear had already gathered and loosed itself.

A forepaw spun the colonel with feather ease. The AK-47 flew. Cloth and flesh blossomed red. The black

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box leaped free and hit the ground.

Neil didn't wait to see more. He threw himself at the fallen AK-47, seized it, rolled over, and got the drop on the chopper pilot. The man, who had jumped out and come running to get in a shot without hitting the colonel, caught Neil's move in a side glance and skidded to a stop. Neil fired a burst near enough to the pilot to show he could drop the pilot if he didn't drop the gun. The pilot stood in awkward outrage, hesitating while the bear took another swipe at the crumpled colonel. Then, as if deciding the colonel was through anyway whatever he did, he dropped his shoulders and the gun.

Suddenly Neil remembered Moisei. Waving the pilot further back from the gun, Neil turned his head.

Moisei had retrieved the black box. Click. The bear backed away from the colonel's body. Click. The bear haunched down. Click. The bear fell asleep.

The colonel moaned. Moisei quickly put the black box away and knelt beside him to press torn flesh together with one hand and to take a neck pulse with the other. He looked up at Neil.

"I think he will live if we can get him to a hospital."

He spoke to the pilot in Russian. The pilot eyed Neil for permission. Neil guessed and nodded.

The pilot strode to the chopper. Neil watched to see the pilot did not try to use the radio. The pilot strode back bearing the first-aid kit. The pilot knew what the terrible coldness could do, knew better than to run himself into a deadly sweat. The fright in the pilot's eyes had to be for his earlier exertion. Neil himself felt the creeping chill from his jump for the gun and from the superflow of his blood now that he had escape in his hands. Holding himself down, he picked up the pilot's AK-47 and unslung his own .375 magnum from the colonel's good shoulder. He stepped to one side as the pilot came up.

While the doctor and the pilot tied the colonel together, Neil made for the chopper. He climbed in and used the butt of the pilot's AK-47 to smash the radio. He looked around to make sure there were no more weapons, found none, but found a carton of field rations. He pocketed as much as he could. He returned to the others.

The doctor and the pilot had done all they could for the colonel. The pilot eyed Neil for permission. Neil nodded.

The pilot and the doctor carried the colonel to the chopper and got him aboard. The pilot sat at the controls, waiting for Moisei to climb in. Neil started to gesture Moisei aboard, then caught the merest flicker in Moisei's eyes, the

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slightest shake of Moisei's head, but the greatest intensity. Neil's mind changed.

"Tell him I'm holding you hostage. Tell him all I want is to get safely back across the line and then I'll let you go. Tell him you're my safe conduct."

He caught the slightest slackening of muscle, the merest letting out of breath, but the greatest relief, as Moisei turned to speak to the pilot. The colonel stopped moaning, falling into a listening silence while Moisei spoke.

Then the colonel's eyes opened and fixed on Moisei. Fighting the painkiller Moisei had shot into him, the colonel spoke to Moisei in phlegmy Russian. Moisei answered.

The last Neil saw of the colonel, the colonel's unsmiling eyes were on him and the lower smile was bloody but in place. Then the door closed, and Neil and Moisei backed away from under the churning air.

Neil held an AK-47 on the chopper to keep the pilot from trying something tricky, such as a sudden swing or a felling swoop. The chopper lifted away smoothly.

"Okay, let's make tracks." He looked with regret at the sleeping bear.

He set out and Moisei fell in. The ground was too hard for tracks.

When sight and sound of the chopper had died down, Neil turned to Moisei, who had surprised him by keeping pace.

"What did you and Semenov talk about?"

Moisei seemed to be still seeing and hearing the chopper. He shook himself.

"He asked me what went wrong. I told him he overdid the control function. It is too soon after the operation. The bear's head should have had more time to heal." Moisei studied what he could see of Neil's face, then went on. "That is what I told him and I believe he believed me." His voice left a trail of fog.

It was Neil's turn to study Moisei's face. "Is there something not to believe?"

Moisei reached into his pockets, slowing when Neil stiffened, and carefully brought out two black boxes.

"He did not know I had made myself this other one."

Neil grinned. The grin deepened as it told him his face stayed frost-free. "I get it. You made the bear follow the colonel and attack him."

Moisei lowered his gaze and nodded.

Neil's mind raced back to the bear looming over Moisei. He frowned. "Why didn't you use your override when you were down and the bear was on top of you?"

"I believed Col. Semenov would not let the bear kill me. Not while

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he still has some use for me."

Neil nodded, then frowned again. "Why did you wait till we were in sight of the pilot before you sicked the bear on Semenov?"

"It had to be thus. I needed the pilot to witness the attack and see I seemed to have nothing to do with it. If they thought I was to blame, my daughter would suffer."

"You have a daughter here?"

"Yes. That is why I thank you for helping me to escape without seeming to escape."

Neil felt a touch of alarm. He had no intention of dragging the man along. "Is that what I'm doing? Look, maybe you'd better think this through. Won't it amount to the same? Won't they take it out on your daughter if you ask for asylum in the West?"

Moisei's eyes slid from side to side as on a scale beam, weighing this, then came to rest. "I know what. I will seem to have died along the way. We will leave signs of my death by drowning in the polar sea. Later, I will somehow smuggle word to Raissa that I am alive and well."

"Fine. Great idea." Neil's mind was on his arsenal. The overkill was killing him. He unclipped the banana from one AK-47 and handed the weapon to Moisei. "You carry this one."

Moisei held it awkwardly. "Do we really need it?"

"You tell me. How close is your base camp? How many men will they have after us how soon?"

"Forty kilometers. It is a prison camp near Uelen. That is a town here on Cape Dezhneva. The camp provides construction workers and there are some hundreds of guards. What other troops may be on call in the area, I do not know, but I am sure there are at least reserves among the population. So I would say you might very well need all the weapons you can command. But if it comes to a fire fight, please do not count on me."

"I know. Your daughter."

"Thank you for understanding."

That seemed too funny to laugh at. Neil felt his understanding wobbly when he needed it steadiest. He had been going for better than twenty-four hours straight, and it was starting to tell. He needed rest and had to struggle against sleep. Did the bear still snooze?

The pale sun had sunk and they walked deeper into night. Neil had enough understanding to know forty klicks from Semenov gave little lead time. The more distance they made, the greater the search area and the less chance of getting spotted. Speaking of spots.

Neil grimaced, testing for frostbite, but it served as well for Moisei's abrupt halt. "What's wrong?"

Moisei pointed to the stars.

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"We are bearing the wrong way."

"Depends on what you think is the right way. We have a proverb: 'The longest way round is the shortest way home.' That doesn't mean we're leaving by way of Odessa. It means we're steering clear of where I stashed my snowmobile. Your people could have planes in the air before we reached it and got going. My snowmobile can't outrun a jet, much less an air-to-surface rocket."

A broad smile split Moisei's narrow face. "My people."

"Okay, the colonel's people. Like I said, we'll give it a wide berth and camp out till they think we're long gone. Then we'll circle back. If they haven't spotted it and it's still there, we'll dash for my pickup point. If we don't make the rendezvous, it's a heavy trip across the ice. But —" He cut himself off, listening for what he had already heard. "Down, and stay down."

They threw themselves flat.

A vapor trail chalked a parallel to the long night's long horizon.

"See what I mean?"

3

They rose after the chalk line fuzzed out. Neil shaped their course again. Moisei caught him checking his wrist.

"That is no ordinary compass."

"No, it's a mode of my wrist calculator." Neil showed him how it worked. "You put in any coordinates, and this readout tells you how far away you are."

"So. I have not seen it before. It is a new thing?"

Neil shrugged modestly. "State of the art."

"Anyone can buy one of these in your country?"

"If he can come up with the money."

"And you can come up with the money. Then you are only a businessman and have slipped in only to hunt? You are not a spy?"

Only a businessman. That rankled. Business had its privileges. But Neil nodded. "I bought and paid for this myself. But of course I didn't pay the sticker price."

Moisei looked puzzled, then saw. "I see. You had to pay more." Fingers worked in his mitten. "What we call yzatka."

"More? Are you crazy? I got it at a discount store."

Moisei looked puzzled again, then gave up.

They walked on in crackling silence.

Neil broke it. "Yzatka, huh? I always meant to pick up on Russian."

Moisei perked up. "We will have time together. Maybe you will learn some Russian and maybe I will straighten my English."

Neil hoped not. He didn't want time together. He wanted out and

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away. Still, while they had this time together, it helped to talk. He let Moisei draw him out about his work.

Moisei nodded. "So. What we call tolkach. A pusher. An expediter."

"Toll-catch."

The broad grin on the narrow face. "See, you already pick up on Russian."

"Da."

Moisei mittened frozen breath from his glasses to peer at Neil. "Was it not ... foolish to come here after the bear?"

"Begins to look that way, doesn't it? But I took the chance and I'm not crying. Look, the bear isn't a Soviet bear or a Yankee bear. It's a bear bear. It's its own master. It pees its own parameters. Where it ranges is where it belongs. It belongs to me if I can get it in my sights. What the hell, your fishing fleets scoop up our fish, don't they?

"The guy who told me about the bear tried to talk me out of going after it. 'What happens if they catch you poaching? Could blow up into a flap, harm detente.' But I told him just to set me down where I could get on the bear's track and let me worry about the rest."

Moisei shook his head. "Do not take me wrong. For my own sake I am glad you came. But is there no one who will be worrying about what becomes of you?"

Neil shook his head. "My marriage failed, and I have no one to answer to but myself." He clamped his mouth shut. He supposed a shrink would say he was traveling the Old Jizzum Trail, the hunt for the bear being all the same as Ponce de Leon's search for the Fountain of Youth. He hurried to get off that. "How about yourself? What the hell were you and Colonel What's-his-name up to with the bear?"

"Semenov. He is a KGB colonel. Semenov did not have to explain to me, but he went out of his way to explain to me. So I am suspicious of his explanation.

"But his explanation is this. In a few days the Soviet premier will come to this part of the world on a bear hunt. For an excuse to hunt the bear — if the premier needs an excuse and if anyone dares to ask — they will say the bear has turned rogue, is a man-eater.

"Semenov told me he planned to give the premier a good hunt. He would stage an exciting chase and arrange a sure kill. That would make the premier happy with the KGB and with Col. Semenov in particular. I am still not sure what Semenov had in mind. Something more than that, I feel sure."

Moisei moseyed on in musing silence, then resumed. "But, anyway. That is where I came in. I am a brain surgeon. I was to implant

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electrodes in the bear's brain so the colonel might work its moods and moves.

"It revolts me to take part in such experiments. They are too reminded of the Nazi doctors and their experiments. That is one reason why I had already applied for a visa to leave Russia." He shrugged. "Naturally I lost my post, my salary, my friends. At this point in limbo Semenov first approached me.

"This was in Moscow, in the small one-room apartment they had reassigned me and my daughter to. He did not come wearing his uniform but I smelled KGB all the same. He was very smiling, very pleasant. He said he had heard I was at loose ends till such time as I should get my visa. He had work for me, in my line. If I undertook it, no one could point to me as a parasite. If I scratched his back he would scratch mine.

"He told me what I have told you. I told him I did not care to take part. I did not tell him I turned him down for another reason. If something went wrong, who easier to blame than the Zhid? He smiled and left.

"From then on, things got worse for me and my daughter. But she is strong-minded, loyal. Far from pressing me to give in, she upheld me. I needed that support. Things got progressively worse.

"When I sought support from colleagues in the West, came swift retaliation. My colleagues here diagnosed 'chronic schizophrenia of a paranoid type.' I found myself in a blank cell in a mental hospital.

"To stay sane I had to busy my mind. I unraveled the hem of the sweater my daughter had knit, enough to make a measuring cord. I stretched and rubbed the springiness out of it. Then I graduated the cord with knots — fairly accurately, for I knew the width of my thumb and the length of my hand in centimeters. With the cord I measured my cell. 244 centimeters by 152 centimeters.

"At any rate, numbers made confinement tenable, so much so that it annoyed me when the guards broke in upon my isolation, as they did from time to time to keep me off balance. I am sure they watched through the volchok — the 'eye' — for they always came to take me for pills and so-called psychiatry just before I finished scratching the answer down.

"Once I scratched a pentagon on the floor. It was a graph representing the five fifth roots of 32. The guards must have thought I was trying to magic my way out, because they rushed in and made me scrub the pentagon from the floor. I explained that I was attempting to prove the existence of imaginary numbers. They warned me not to

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deface state property again or they would prove, rigorously, that I did not exist.

"From then on I did everything in my head. That was good, for it helped me fight the pills and suggestions.

"One day they took me out of the mental hospital. They drove me to Lubyanka, the KGB headquarters and prison. I recognized the pretty iron gates as we drove through.

"They held me in a waiting cell, to soften me up, I guess. Then a guard took me through the maze. We had hardly got started when a warning light flashed in the corridor. It meant that someone special was going to pass through, someone no prisoner should see. My guard barked, 'Halt, Academician,' and told me to face the wall.

"I faced the wall. But I did not look at the wall. I looked at my glasses. That is, I gazed at the reflection on the inner surface of first the right lens, then the left lens as the person I was not to see passed behind me. I am very near-sighted, so the image showed sharp. I have not seen the man since, but I would know him if I saw him again. Though who he was and why he was special I have no way of knowing.

"Then the man had gone by and my guard was free to take me further. It was Col. Semenov he took me to see. The same cold smile. But I remember that he had nicked himself shaving. It was nice to see he was human.

"He too called me Academician. I am a brain surgeon, but my field is cybernetics, mainly the solving of medical problems by using mathematical methods. But he too, I sensed, called me Academician in mockery.

"I was not feeling well and he knew it. I am sure they had put a drug in my food to loosen the sphincter. That throws even the maturest human back to toilet-training days. You feel guilt and dependency." Moisei smiled a one-sided smile. "In its own way, a kind of catharsis. It helps you confess, agree, say or do anything to end the ordeal.

"Semenov said I was free to choose. I could go back to the yellow house — the mental hospital — or to Siberia to help in the scientific experiment he had spoken of.

"I do not know if I had already reached my ethical threshold, if I had passed the point where you can afford not to sell out. I know that when Semenov added in an offhand way that a court had tried my daughter and that she was now in a Siberian labor camp, I agreed to do what he wanted.

"What he wanted seemed simple enough: rule the bear's mind and bring the bear near enough and hold it still long enough for the

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premier, who is not as good a marksman as he thinks he is, to drop the bear.

"The bear has become a legend, as your presence proves, and Semenov had kept track ever since he had foreseen its use to him. Ten days ago" — Moisei gazed around at the night — "I think it was ten days ago, we flew here and I made ready.

"Technically, I was free, but I had to report to the Uelen police every day, plus Semenov kept close watch as I got together what I would need. Not precisely a rootless cosmopolite, no? But I did manage to see my daughter once. Though just in case I should get above myself, they let me know that Innokentyi Kupchenko, the criminal prisoner overseeing other prisoners on the building project, was in the Great Patriotic War a Ukrainian volunteer with the Sicherheitsdienst. When he saw me he said, 'There's one Zhid we forgot to gas.' I shiver to think of Raissa under him."

Moisei's sudden silence made Neil aware of the all-encompassing, all-permeating coldness. Better get Moisei's mind off his daughter.

"How did you get the bear?"

"Three days ago — I think it was three days ago — we flew up here in the helicopter you saw. We lured the bear as you did, though we burned herring. *Red* herring, no? Hiding behind a mound of ice, I gauged the bear's weight and loaded the right dosage of Sernylan into the powder-charge syringe gun. From ten meters away, Semenov shot the immobilizing drug into the bear's rump.

"We waited out the ten-minute latent period before the drug took. Then we set up a tent — a field hospital — around the bear. The drug put the bear under for four hours, but I finished operating in less than three." Moisei's eyes reflected stars as he relived the challenge.

"Just what did you do to the bear?"

"I implanted electrodes in the anterior, medial, and posterior portions of the hypothalamus. The hypothalamus has pleasure and pain areas, hunger and satiety areas. Stimulation of the medial portion, for example, sparks effective defense reaction, such as frontal attack on the nearest perceived object. The black box is a transmitter that electrically stimulates these areas."

Neil nodded. "I catch on. The human body is full of strange connections too. We're wired weird. Ever spoke into your belly button? The tip of your penis tingles. I don't know how it works for women. I never thought to ask my wife. But that's the gimmick behind acupuncture, isn't it?"

Moisei gave Neil his full atten-

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tention for a full minute, then went on. "Yes, you might say that is the gimmick." He held out his mittened hands and looked at them. "The bear is huge. When he twitched or growled in his sleep, my hands wanted to shake. But I feared failing more than I feared the bear: fear can drive out fear. I did the job, sewed the bear up, and we pulled back and watched. We waited a good hour for the drug to wear off.

"The bear woke, shook his head, shoved himself to his feet, and gained strength as he wobbled away. He did not run far. Semenov had the black box I had built; he wished to test my work.

"He pulled the bear back and put the bear through its paces. He made the bear charge an invisible foe, kill an invisible seal, gobble nothingness, vomit out of satiety. Only when Semenov had satisfied himself that he had the bear under full control did he let the bear follow its own will and go.

"We returned to the helicopter. But we did not take off. Semenov took a radio call on his earphones. It must have told him you were coming. We waited for you."

Neil got his jaw back up. "You what?"

"Yes, we did not simply happen upon you. Even we sent the bear to your place of ambush."

"He knew *I* was coming?"

"I do not know that he knew your name. I know only that Semenov joked with the pilot about his people tracking someone he called medvezhatnik, 'bear-killer.' It was a word Semenov liked to say, I imagine, because it is underworld slang for safe-cracker — and the medvezhatnik believed himself to be safely cracking the Soviet perimeter."

Neil had gone more cold than hot. Walking tended to warm them, in spite of the believable temperature, so that from time to time they removed their mittens to cool off. Neil pulled his mittens back on.

"Is there anything else I should know about my situation?"

Moisei smiled a frost-testing smile. "Only what I can tell you about mine, because we now share the same situation."

"That makes me just as much your hostage as you are mine."

He stared through cloudy lenses at Moisei's cloudy lenses.

4

They trudged on in breathy silence. Neil broke it grudgingly.

"Okay, tell me about the black box — or black boxes. Maybe we can create a diversion with the bear. What's the range?"

"By now we have put the bear beyond our range, I should think." Moisei shrugged. "I am not sure why I made the extra black box. I

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would like to think I planned to free the bear, out of respect for life. At any rate, I made it and when you came into this I saw my chance.

"Semenov held up my exit visa, put me in the yellow house, held my daughter hostage. Semenov was the master, I was the slave. The slave has a duty to free himself, if he must kill the master to do it.

"Still, I meant the bear to maul him, not kill him. I hope he is not dead, merely under sedation in hospital till after we have escaped."

"I'm glad you're thinking positively."

Neil halted abruptly. Straight ahead rosy smoke rose straight. The wind had stilled, but an inner wind-chill factor came into play with Neil thinking negatively. He grabbed Moisei to halt as well.

"We could be running into trouble."

Moisei gingerly stamped his weary feet. "Hardly running. But you are right. With trouble, speed is relative, and even backing away from it we could be rushing into it."

They glassed the horizon. Neil lent Moisei the six-power and himself used the twelve-power.

A round tent sprang out of the night, growing dimly translucent with the glow of a hearthfire. White pelts hung from the eaves.

Moisei handed the glasses back. "I see no one, but that must be the yurt of a Chukchi trapper. Most Chukchi are reindeer herdsmen and move south with their herds in winter. But some few stay and run traplines. I do not think we will find trouble. I think we will find shelter and warmth and rest."

And a chance for a good leak. "We'll chance it. I'll bet the trapper hasn't seen many people from the big red apple. Maybe I can pass."

"Ah. But it will be even better if he thinks you are not Russian. Chukchi have no love of Russians. Russian traders cheated them, gave them sicknesses, killed them, took their land. Cossack guns against Chukchi arrows."

Neil felt a grin of recognition form. "The names are different but the story's the same. Speaking of Cossack guns, we'll keep a Kalashnikov in the hole."

He unzipped the topmost layer of his suit and hid his folded AK-47 under the armpit. Moisei watched frowning as Neil zipped over the bulge.

"I take it that you know it is unwise, aside from considerations of culture, to bring guns indoors."

"Hell, I use whatever tools come to hand. I won't care if it freezes up outside later if it works inside first. What counts is to have it handy when I need it." The steel felt coldly reassuring.

He took Moisei's AK-47, clipped the magazine back into it, and handed the gun again to Moisei.

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Moisei smiled a one-sided smile.

"You have grown to trust me."

"Why not?" Neil swung his .375 magnum so that it almost covered Moisei. "Look funny if I'm loaded and you're not. You're going to leave it outside anyway, for cultural and practical considerations."

"You are very practical-minded. If I may be cultural-minded, I think you had better take off that mask. The Chukchi cling to primitive ways. The masks of civilization could frighten them."

Neil eyed Moisei a moment, then one-handedly pulled off his ski mask. "That better?"

Moisei eyed Neil a longer moment. "So that is what you look like. You are a bit younger than I thought. Yes. It is a good face. A hard face but a good face. Not a Cossack face. Let me check it for frostbite."

Neil hurried to cover his ears again. Each checked the other's face.

They did not lighten their steps to lessen the crunch as they neared the yurt. In silent agreement they strode noisily to give warning of their coming. They had nothing to hide, no reason to sneak. The yurt had its back to them.

"The door always faces —" Moisei cut himself short. He led the way around the yurt.

A man with brutal cheekbones and gentle eyes opened the door. Stone-faced, stone-age-faced; then he smiled and winter broke up. Moisei and Neil hung their guns and field glasses outside with the pelts. The man spoke some welcome. He made a drawing-in gesture and stepped back to let them pass.

It was a double-walled tent of reindeer hide. A small coal stove lit up their little night. The walls seemed soaked rancid and breathed out their history in the red heat. Sitting cross-legged on reindeer robes, Neil and Moisei watched the man stir dried roots, leaves, and stems into a pot of meat and fat.

Moisei sipped melted ice. "A good year. He has chopped down to old ice." He spoke to the man in what seemed pidgin Russian and the man answered. "He is alone. His partner has driven their sled south to the factoriya, the trading post, with furs and returns in a few days with a load of fuel and goods."

The man nodded toward the fire, grinned, and said words.

"He says he does not usually feed so well the great lady who spreads her robes of striped sable."

Neil sought focus. "What great lady? Where? I thought you said he said he was alone."

"He means the fire. He tells me he sensed our coming and burned it big to guide us here."

Neil cast his gaze around, though no longer for the great lady.

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"Sensed? The only thing that makes sense is if he has a radio. Have Semenov's people put out a 10-34 call on us?"

Moisei asked and translated. "He says he has no radio. He says he just knew men were coming. The rational explanation — he does not say but I say — is that he saw our moving specks mirrored on the sky." Moisei took off his glasses and wiped steam from the lenses. He turned his unseeing bare eyes on Neil. "Of course, even without a radio warning, the locals are always on the lookout for — I will spell out the word — b, r, o, d, n, y, a, g, i: namely, escaped convicts. They get a reward if they turn an escaped convict in, punishment if they do not."

He put his glasses and a smile on.

The man pointed his pot-stirring knife at Neil. "Nye Russkiy."

Moisei answered for Neil. "I explained to him that, yes, you are no Russian. You are a Pole, a comrade big shot, living in Moscow. We are bureaucrats on leave, hunting the great white bear. They have all heard of the bear if they have not seen it."

Neil had nodded, agreeing with Moisei's tone while Moisei spoke to the trapper, but he now took exception to "bureaucrats." He indexed himself and eyed the trapper authoritatively. "Toll-catch."

Eyes smarting in the smoke, he looked for understanding in the man's eyes: but he drew blanks.

The man spoke to Moisei.

"He has a permanent sod house a day's ride from here. Tomorrow or the day after or the day after, when his partner returns, they will fold this tent and head for home. He invites us to follow along for a visit. Meanwhile, we are welcome to eat and sleep here."

The trapper thrust on knife-point at Neil the choicest bit, the fat behind the reindeer's eye.

"An offer I can't refuse."

He was glad weariness and warmth were closing his eyes, excusing him to close his mouth and wave away more. Feeling greasy and queasy, he lay on his side and half-eyed the flames and the shadows. Their host added to the shadow play, bringing out string and weaving a cat's-cradle figure of a running reindeer. Pretty, but would it play in Peoria?

"I wonder..."

"What?" He frowned at Moisei's voice. He had nearly overtaken sleep.

"If I go further south to Uelen and try to bear my daughter away, will you help me?"

"That's crazy. The heat's got you. Get yourself out safely. Then you can appeal to the conscience of the world."

"The conscience of the world."

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"Look, Moisei, I'm dropping off. We'll talk about it later, okay?"

"Okay."

Too many variables. Too many unknowns. He had set out on a simple hunt. Quick in, quick out. Try for simple and less would go wrong. Something went wrong with sleep again. Moisei's voice again: loud by its very softness.

"I am too tired to sleep. My mind keeps too busy. Your wrist calculator. May I work numbers on it?"

Too weary to argue, Neil slipped it off. "Be careful with it."

Moisei studied the watch-compass-calculator a moment, located the stem that pulled out to press the tiny keys, and went to play, working them iteratively. Neil fell asleep to the rhythmic clicking.

He surfaced to a growing feeling of pressure on the temples, the pinch of giant iron fingers. He squeezed his eyes open. No great hand clamped his head, but the iron ghost of one gripped tight. The clicking had stopped, but he heard another beat, one he could not get a fix on. Men marching across the iron tundra?

But Moisei and the trapper sat still, murmuring in pidgin Russian. They looked his way as he stirred. They smiled gravely at him, pretending they didn't hear the oncoming troops.

"You have had a good rest?" Moisei spoke with sleepy excitement. "I have found out something interesting on the calculator. Take any number. Enter it. Keep alternating the natural antilog and reciprocal buttons. Sooner or later the readout narrows to the reciprocals .5671433 and 1.7632228. Why is this so? Because raising the base 1.7632228 by the exponent 1.7632228 gives you 2.7182818, which is *e*, the base of natural logarithms."

Naturally. Natural as falling off a log.

Had Moisei thrown in with the trapper, made a deal tossing Neil to the wolves? Sly, both of them. He could be sly too. Pretend he didn't hear the oncoming troops.

"Have you finished with my calculator? Mind giving it back?"

"Oh, of course." But Moisei was slower than his words. He got to his feet awkwardly, smiling foolishly at his legs as they coordinated badly. He yawned and put a hand to his temples. "It has grown close in here. I wonder..." He stood swaying, one hand cupping the calculator, the other worrying his brow.

Way it looked, Moisei not in it with the trapper. Only the trapper to reckon with. Have to hurry. Some poison or drug. Taking faster. Have to hurry.

Under the trapper's grave smile Neil slowly, slyly, brought his hid-

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den AK-47 to bear on the man. Good, Moisei moving out of line of fire.

Before he could squeeze off a burst, the world went out.

5

The fire was dead, the air in the yurt cold but fresh. He blew his breath away, the better to see Moisei. Now began to cohere, here began to connote. Moisei bent over him, bringing him to. Behind Moisei the Chukchi beamed anxiously. Neil stirred.

Moisei let up with a sigh. "Excite yourself if you want to. He thinks you are a shaman. Your manic hallucination seemed an ecstatic trance. He saw your soul go out to the western heavens, to the top of the mountain where Night lives."

The trapper nodded agreement with the sound of Moisei's voice, and spoke.

"Leütt — that is his name — says we all know the truth. We have seen it without understanding it. It is both too large and too small to take in."

Leütt nodded.

Neil drew a long, ragged breath. His throat felt raw, his mouth tasted sour, his head throbbed. "What I don't understand is what happened? How long have I been out?" He moved to bring his watch wrist in view, remembered Moisei had the watch, then saw Moisei had restored the watch to him after all. His arm was in a sleeve of reindeer hide. His own clothing was gone. His AK-47 too was missing. One thing at a time. "Two whole hours?"

"If that is what it says. I will explain why you feel like a bear with a sore head. No, don't touch. I have put a dressing on to stop the bleeding. Before you went under, did you sense pressure at the temples? Yes? And did you seem to hear a measured tread? That was your own pulse.

"I explained to Leütt that you get these spells. That you are a shaman. But it was carbon monoxide that got you, of course. Our friend does not know, and I did not remember, that when iron is red-hot CO passes through the iron. You too forgot.

"You misread your symptoms. I saw you point the gun at our friend. I moved to stop you from firing. But I suffered from CO poisoning as well and did not strike true. You did not go down at once. You thrashed around and staggered about.

"At last you fell, knocking over the stove, spilling the hot coals, burning holes in your clothing, and doing your head no good. Our friend has given you his spare outerwear and I have tried to patch your scalp. I told our friend that to

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keep you from hurting others and yourself I sometimes have to put you out. For which you later thank me."

"Thanks a bunch. How did you explain the AK-47?"

"I do not think he saw it. I used misdirection and hid the weapon inside my own clothing. It also helped that the yurt caught fire and our friend had to put out the blaze."

Leütt nodded.

6

It seemed wise to get a good start before Leütt's partner showed. The partner was sure to have heard about them at the factoriya.

A bad night's sleep had not helped Neil's head. But his feet felt steady enough under him and he was raring to get them going.

Leütt threw in a reindeer-calf cap and felt velenkies. Moisei gave Leütt a threaded needle. Neil gave Leütt a bar of chocolate. Leütt and Moisei spoke.

"He asks where are we bound? I told him no matter where we head we are always in search of ourselves. That is true, you know. Seeking, the cabalists counted and found that the word exactly in the middle of the Old Testament is the verb 'to seek.' Yes, we must come face to face with ourselves in the end."

"Meanwhile we better show our behinds. I'll feel happier talking about where and why we're going when we're on our way."

"Yes, we will start now." Moisei and Leütt spoke. "He tells us to go in the name of the Spirit of the Deer."

Neil and Moisei took their weapons and field glasses from the eaves and strode into the grayness. It did not take long for the grayness to swallow Leütt and his yurt.

It took as short for Neil to start weighing his shamanistic experience. He had been to the top of the mountain where Night lives. He had never been into Zen or est or TM, but he guessed that must be what they meant by altered consciousness. A mere change in the oxygen supply. But he felt it had heightened his awareness for good.

Moisei, seeming to share Neil's thoughtful mood, with his silence helped Neil concentrate. Moisei unquestioningly bore along with Neil when Neil recalled the snowmobile's location from the calculator's memory and homed on it. Moisei appeared to be putting his all into matching Neil's pace.

Neil's awareness moved out to encompass Moisei. He had been at the heart of things; Moisei at some time had been there too. Now he understood the searching expression he caught on Moisei's face whenever their eyes met. The look was the look of one wanting to read

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in another's face knowledge and acknowledgment of shared mortality.

A new sad smile showed Neil that Moisei now read the knowledge and the acknowledgment. Then why Moisei's flicker as of disappointment when their glances broke off? To punish Moisei, Neil forced the pace. Moisei kept up, hour after hour.

In what way did Moisei weigh him and find him wanting? It could be only one way. They were leaving Moisei's daughter farther and farther behind.

The following hour's terrain grew hillier. But that was not what weighed Neil down. There was another pull working.

When Neil's limit came, it came with no slackening of pace but with a sudden halt. Moisei stared at him in puzzlement. There was a trick to speaking without sucking in the cold. In his forgetfulness, Neil drew in the bite.

"Ah, what the hell. Let's turn back. I'll help you get your girl out if you think there's a chance. Which way's the labor camp? How long will it take?"

It took Moisei a moment to find his breath and words to fit it. "That is good. I am glad." He gave his sad smile. "I have been counting the paces. We are nearly there."

It took Neil a space to take it in. "You mean we've been heading..."

"While you were unconscious I changed the coordinates in your calculator."

Neil stared at Moisei in outrage. Then in alarm. "What else were you doing while I was out?" He touched his dressing through the reindeer-calf hat.

"Do not touch. You will start the bleeding."

"Maybe, maybe not."

"It is not what you are thinking."

"You know what I'm thinking? Could be till just now you've been doing my thinking. Did you tell Leütt you were letting devils out while you wired my mind? I'm going to see if I have stitches like the bear."

"Stop. I did take a few stitches because you tore your scalp. But I did not go inside. True, I could have improvised surgical tools and electrodes. But though I had the means I did not have the will."

"Sure. But you did screw the compass around. So, just to make doubly sure, I want you to hold your hands away from your body while I take the black boxes from your pockets."

Moisei held fiercely still while Neil frisked him. "You are a weapon. A tool. You did not come across the line as a person feeling for persons. You came as part of your rifle, the sighting and triggering mechanism of your rifle. Why

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should I not use a tool if it falls into my hands? Is that not what a tolkach does? But I have scruples. The bear's brain, yes. A human's, no. Not even to save my daughter. If you had not volunteered, I would have informed you we were nearing the area in time for you to steal away. I would have tried on my own to deliver my daughter."

The shakedown yielded first the extra AK-47. It had filled with moisture. When the air hit it you could see it freeze into a useless block. Neil hurled it away. His fury carried over into the force he patted Moisei down with. A tool, a weapon? And something to cast aside when useless? The AK-47, not Neil Benthorn.

He came up with the two black boxes. He stepped back, put the boxes on the ground, braced himself, then stomped hard twice, crushing them. He winced at the twin jolts of pain that shot up through his frame to the top of his head: they might have been signals — but signals now from the dead. He smiled to see Moisei still hold the pose of hands away from body. On the point of telling Moisei as you were, he pulled his mouth down and stepped in to frisk Moisei again, thoroughly. He came up with nothing more.

Moisei eyed him with a sad smile. "There are Easter eggs nested with Easter eggs. There are matryushka, wooden dolls wombed within wooden dolls. There is no third black box."

"Okay. Forget it. I'm sorry."

"You are sorry. But for the wrong thing. I do not blame you for suspecting me. I blame you for suspecting yourself." He stared at Neil in outrage. "Do you mistrust your good impulses so much that you fear they are not your own but some black box's?" Then in alarm. "Does this mean you have changed your mind?"

"I don't go back on my word."

"Good. Okay."

"Okay — on condition there are no conditions."

"No conditions." Moisei smiled broadly, splitting his face. "And no conditioning." He pointed to a surge of grayness. "That should be Mount Dezhneva. The labor camp is at its foot. There are lead and zinc deposits as well as construction sites in the neighborhood."

Neil nodded. The mountain misted away as he gazed. His eyes made a jagged hunt of the gray horizon before he trusted himself to the arrow on his wrist.

They followed the arrow into the thickening grayness.

7

A shadow on the frosted-glass window of air stopped them. An old reindeer in brown and green camouflage paint pawed through the

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hard snow to snatch a mouthful of moss. An outlaw from the herd.

"Know how you feel."

It looked at Neil, whirled stiffly, and ran away arthritically.

"Go in the name of the Spirit of the Deer."

A glow rimmed the rise dead ahead. Moisei spoke Neil's thought. "Here we must begin to be most careful." They topped the rise. A weblike blur of lights shaped out of the milky mist, translucent flesh of a guard-tower-and-barbed-wire skeleton. "The labor camp." Neil felt he had never felt winter before.

Again Moisei spoke Neil's mind. "It would be foolhardy to try to break Raissa out of camp. We must wait for them to march her out to the construction site. There we shall have a chance to take her away." He pointed to headlights. "There is the road. The site lies that way."

Now and then a truck rumbled to or from the camp. Neil and Moisei paralleled the beaten road widely to stay out of the occasional sweep of headlights. They crouched and waited as a thundering millipede approached and swung past. The prisoners marched with hands behind back, each huddled into self and all into one against the cold and against the guards whose shouts and barks kept them closed up.

Moisei consulted Neil's wrist. "That is the day shift coming back in. Raissa is on the night shift. We will have plenty of time to beat Raissa's brigade to the construction site. I am sure I remember the building Raissa is working on. We can be waiting for her there."

The millipede tailed away. Neil and Moisei got up and moved on.

Moisei sighed. "So much wasting of time, of life. So much standing and waiting while the guards count and recount the zeks. For the guards' own sakes, the guards make sure they have brought back all of the first brigade before they let out the second brigade. But Raissa will be leaving camp around 7 p.m. Work starts at 8, ends at 5 a.m. Eating and sleeping wait for however long the counting and recounting takes. Raissa does not yet know, but she has already had her last of that." Maybe Moisei was thinking *One way or another, the last.* For he sighed again, this sigh a heavy one.

The construction site, another skeletonized glow, proved to be a whole new town in the making, the main street paved with wood. As they neared it, Moisei handed Neil the AK-47.

"You will be my guard."

Neil weighed the AK-47 and his own .375 magnum rifle ambivalently. "Look funny, me carrying two weapons."

"No problem." Moisei scroung-

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ed scraps of wood and wire and bound them into a bundle around the rifle. He shouldered the bundle and hung his head to hide his face and the lack of a numbered white patch on his hat. "You see?"

Glancing up from under, Moisei led the way. No one challenged them. A few fires burned in sheltered spots and a few shapes outlined the fires. If anyone saw Neil and Moisei, the shape of a guard and the shape of a zek were enough.

"This is the building I remember. It has not got much farther along."

Inside the empty shell of the building they sheltered behind a thrumming canvas windbreak and settled down to wait. Neil spent the wait studying the technique of laying foundations in winter. You piped steam through a big hose into a large vat of water. Meanwhile, you have been heating sand and gravel on a six-foot by twelve-foot hot plate. You pour the hot water and the hot sand and gravel, together with cement, into a concrete mixer. You pour the concrete into the wooden forms and hook the iron reinforcements in the concrete to a heavy-duty electric cable to dry your concrete. In the case of the building next door, a burst hose seemed to have rendered the process abstract. The fires were out and the foundation had the look of work in abeyance.

At a shaking, rather than at a sound, Neil and Moisei moved to look out through an empty window opening facing on the wooden street. A new millipede unfogged, though it breathed a mist of its own. A five-filed millipede of zeks. They watched it stop and break into sections. One section headed their way. A group of women with a male straw boss.

Moisei pointed to the bearlike man. A wisp of breath matched Moisei's whisper. "Innokentyi Kupchenko." Then he pointed to one of the women. "That one is Raissa." His voice seemed even with effort.

To Neil they all looked bulkily alike. But as he fixed on that one, he sensed slimness and grace under the heavy coat and the stolidity.

Kupchenko detailed Raissa and a half dozen others to bring bricks from a huge pile and stack them nearer at hand for laying. More than Moisei's whispers, Kupchenko's voice told Neil that however many bricks she stacked she could never stack enough.

Moisei and Neil drew back deeper into the building, putting themselves behind a head-high dividing wall. Kupchenko detailed another woman to start a fire for warmth and tea, no doubt for the favored few. Neil sucked in. Now or never. Before work got going smoothly the whole construction

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site would see much moving around, and one more small group would draw little notice. With a stay-put gesture at Moisei, Neil took a step out.

Standing bearlike, Kupchenko had started to warm himself in anticipation, watching a woman in a corner form shavings into a curl of flame. Neil took another step. Kupchenko turned. Neil took one more step. Kupchenko eyed the oncoming comrade with care, not yet knowing whether to fawn or swagger. Sharp eyes in a flat face.

"Innokentyi Kupchenko?"

Was it Neil's accent that pulled Kupchenko's frown into place, that made him hesitate when Neil beckoned? The lazily held AK-47 and the strapped field glasses resolved doubt enough to bring Kupchenko forward, nodding inquiringly. Neil stepped back. Kupchenko frowned again but rounded the wall. He stopped short on seeing Moisei. Had word reached him the Zhid was on the loose? He swung to Neil and widened his eyes at what he read in Neil's.

Kupchenko swelled his chest and opened his mouth. The stock of Neil's AK-47 drove the shout back down the man's throat. Kupchenko's head cracked hard against the brick wall, his body slid to the floor, he lay still. Blood ran out at the broken corner of his mouth, crystallized, stopped.

Moisei knelt to feel for a pulse. He looked up at Neil and shook his head. They eyed each other. They had meant only to put Kupchenko away for a few hours, keep him from riding herd on Raissa that long, give themselves a good start. They heard the fire build. Soon the woman would be wondering what kept Kupchenko from soaking it up.

Neil followed Moisei's gaze to a window opening giving on the construction hanging fire next door. He saw the wooden form awaiting concrete pour and gave a short nod. They dragged Kupchenko to the opening. The coast looked murky enough. Neil climbed out and, with Moisei shoving and himself pulling, got a fireman's carry on Kupchenko. He toted the body to the nearest corner of the form, heaved it over into the form.

They found the path leading to and from the brick pile and stood in wait. Women passed unseeing, each carrying a load of bricks on a square board; some on the head, most cradled to the breast.

Moisei called softly to Raissa her name. She started but did not drop her bricks. She glanced around, slipped away toward Moisei and Neil. She darted a wondering eye at Neil and his gun, then set the bricks down and straightened quickly to bearhug Moisei. Papa was the same in Russian.

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Raissa's papa examined Raissa's face, mouth, and hands. He fingered her close-cropped hair as well. They spoke in Russian and Moisei nodded approvingly. He remembered Neil with a grimace of apology.

"When I saw her before, I did not like the looks of her gums, her fingernails, her skin. But she has been chewing pine needles as I told her to, for the Vitamin C."

"Worry about her health after we're the hell out of here."

"Sorry. You are right. Raissa, this is an American friend, Neil Benthorn. She speaks better English than I. Though I am picking up on the nuances. Now we will get the hell out of here."

8

The engineers had bulldozed snow windrows to keep drifts away from the construction site and roadways. That had given cover to Neil and Moisei coming. It gave cover to Neil, Moisei, and Raissa going.

Just in case, they were a guard prodding two zeks carrying firewood. Either the milky air helped them pass for that, or no one noticed them at all.

Then, once well away from the site, they stopped to unbundle the rifle. Neil switched weapons with Moisei and smiled at Raissa.

"I feel better carrying this. I'm more familiar with it."

His opening gambit put them on the wrong footing. Her face unfriendlied without losing the answering smile.

"You are a hunter?"

"Not for a living."

"You hunt for fun, then?"

"Not fun. Sport."

"Ah. There is a great difference." She nodded wisely.

At each step he had only made it worse. What the hell did she want from him? Why the hell should he care what she thought of him? What did he have in common with this hollow-cheeked girl with the skin bruise-dark under the withholding eyes?

Still, when from time to time as they trudged onward she linked her arm in her father's or squeezed Moisei or held Moisei's hand as if to make reality more real, Neil grew more aware of needing a shave.

Neither Raissa or Moisei asked him to let up the pace he set or to lengthen the breathers he allowed or to shorten the stretches between breathers or to increase the bits of chocolate and pemmican he doled out from his remaining pocketful. He didn't know how it felt to them, but to him time took on a grayness in his mind as featureless as the tundra and measureless even in weariness.

Only the arrow and the coordinates readout on his wrist told

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him they were making tracks in the right direction — and after Moisei's monkeying how sure could he be his calculator told him true?

Somewhen he spotted something gray on gray off to his left. No use alarming the others if it was only something in his mind. He fell a few steps behind to glass it without their knowing.

A bear. The bear.

He watched it rear up and nose the wind. It stood just within range of his rifle.

A chill of warmth traveled his spine. He held the bear in his eyes the time it would have taken him to bag it. Then the bear foured and vanished.

Neil caught up with Raissa and Moisei. He said nothing of the bear. But for some reason when they took their next break he found himself telling Raissa about something he had long forgotten.

"My father liked to tell about the earliest film he remembered having seen. He wasn't sure if it was a silent and couldn't recall the title and never found anyone who had ever seen the film or even heard of it. But he knew it was about a member of an arctic expedition whose ship had become icebound. The man was the sole survivor. His metabolism changed and he adapted to the conditions and probably went mad. But he lived, and when rescue came years later he was furred like a polar bear and had to be caged. He became the property of a sideshow, fell for a young girl with the show — the only person who could tame him, and the way my father remembered it the girl's faith in him and his faith in the girl — plus an operation — brought him back to his human self. My father was a little kid when he saw the film. The furry man scared the hell out of him. But he stayed to see the film again."

Raissa didn't smile, but Neil thought he heard a smile in her voice. "Fairy tales are frightfully attractive when you do not have to live them."

She had a point there, he agreed: this flash in the grayness showed him himself looking back years from now and seeing himself as the handsome prince — but right now he felt stinking filthy and in as much distress as the maiden.

But the going seemed easier from then on, as if some part of the burden had lifted from him.

He recognized the hummock, like a sleeping giant polar bear. He stopped himself and the others and glassed the landscape. Nothing but nothingness. Uneasiness flooded in at thought of the very ease of their getaway. Why the lack of hot pursuit, of patrol contrails patterning the sky? His chest tightened.

Rifle at the ready, he rounded

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the hummock. It would not have surprised him to find not only his snowmobile but a bandaged and vengeful Col. Semenov comfortably awaiting them. His pulse raced.

He found only his snowmobile. When he had left it here, engine heat had softened the surface; the snowmobile had frozen down. Raissa and Moisei helped Neil jar the snowmobile loose before he started it.

It was a tight squeeze but they all got in. The extra weight showed itself quickly. The greater ski pressure helped on the turns but hindered on the straightaways. If the readout was right, they had six hours to reach the pickup point.

If the readout was right, they had made it with an hour to spare. Neil coasted the snowmobile to a stop at what his calculator said was the pickup point. They got out and stretched. If Bob failed to show, they would have plenty of exercise. They had fuel for only a few klicks more and would have to hike the rest of the way across the strait.

But in less than an hour the Cessna 185 materialized, wagged, and landed.

Bob opened the door. He glanced at Moisei and stared at Raissa's chest sign bearing her name and patronymic, last name, and the numbers of the division and brigade she belonged to. Aside from a slight flicker of the eyelid, the broken carved ivory of his face did not change. He drew breath to shout over the engine.

Neil forestalled him, waved him back inside. "Forget the snowmobile, Bob. Just get us the hell off the ice and in the air."

"Sure thing. Hop in, folks."

They got settled, Neil in the seat beside Bob, Raissa and Moisei behind them. The Cessna lifted on one sigh.

Almost at once, Moisei tapped Neil's shoulder. "Excuse, may I borrow your calculator?"

Neil passed it back, trading smiles with Raissa: Papa was a kid with a new toy.

Bob wrinkled his nose at Neil's getup. "Wasn't sure it was you at first. Looks like you ran into everything but the bear."

"Everything *and* the bear." He told Bob about it — all but that he had run into the bear not once but twice.

Bob shook his head. "If I didn't see your trophies I wouldn't believe you."

"I wouldn't believe me myself." Neil leaned back, letting the acids of tenseness drain.

The weather closed in and Bob listened with a faint frown to his com-nav earplug. But all was well. Moisei clicked away and Raissa snored gently. Just as Neil's eyes closed, he felt a tap.

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"I have a riddle for you, Neil. Which is greater, 74.41102 squared or the square root of 30658369?"

Neil cleared his facial display before turning his head. Then he saw Moisei had the calculator in compass mode. The slowly shifting seconds of the coordinates showed the plane heading back toward Siberia.

Was Moisei conning him again? He glanced at Raissa. She had wakened and, eyes wide open, looked as puzzled as he felt. But she linked her arm in Moisei's. Neil faced forward and took in the magnetic compass over the ADF and the gyro direction indicator. They backed up the calculator readout. Bob had changed course.

Bob seemed to sense the charge in the air. "The radar controllers announce severe wind shears at one thousand feet. Looks like we're going to log us some white-knuckle time till I find us another landing place."

Neil nodded. Seemed reasonable. Seemed just as reasonable for Moisei to be uptight.

Moisei's voice strained for lightness. "The riddle, Neil. Give up? Watch."

Neil twisted to watch. Each solution came out 5537. Upside down, each read LESS. Lifting a finger to hold Neil's attention. Moisei painfully made the numbers speak further. Shhh bOb LIES bOb IS — Moisei touched the sum key and the 1 key: sum one ... someone — ELSE.

Moisei cleared the display. He touched the outer edges of his eyeglass lenses, darted his eyes from far left to far right, then stared at Neil as if to draw Neil's mind into his.

A corridor in Lubyanka in Moscow. Moisei's KGB guard is taking him to see Col. Semenov. A warning light flashes. The guard halts him and turns him to the wall. *I faced the wall. But I did not look at the wall. I looked at my glasses. That is, I gazed at the reflection in first the right lens, then the left lens as the person I was not to see passed behind me. I am very nearsighted, so the image showed sharp. I have not seen the man since but I would know him if I saw him again. Though who he was and why he was special I have no way of knowing.*

Bob Artisarlook. No wonder there had been no hot pursuit; a coded radio message to Bob had been enough. Bob was flying them back to Col. Semenov.

Maybe not the real Bob Artisarlook but a Soviet agent who had sacrificed an ear and part of his face to make him Bob's look-alike. Had the real Bob made a forced landing on the wrong side of the line at some time and died in the accident or under questioning? Had Semenov promised this man

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plastic surgery to undo this plastic surgery after he completed his mission?

His mission. To bait some foolhardy American into slipping across the line. This at a time when the Soviet premier would be bear-hunting in the area. Did Semenov mean to stage an assassination attempt? Or did Semenov belong to a group with takeover plans and have in mind a real assassination? Either way, Semenov had been setting this foolhardy American up for a show trial with or without brainwashing. Score one for Russia in the big game of world domination.

Neil reached back and Moisei handed him the AK-47. Neil pointed it at Bob. "Get us back on course."

Eyeball to eyeball, Neil watched Bob watch him and weigh alternatives. Would Neil dare shoot the plane's pilot in midair? True, Neil had asked questions about handling the craft on their many flights, and Bob had let him take the controls a couple-three times, but flying it on his own through turbulence and landing it blind was something again. Still, Neil had more to lose than Bob and would take greater risks. Neil had already proved his foolhardiness.

They got back on course.

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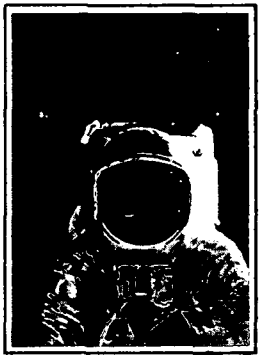

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Luke Skywalker, Dimwit

Baird Searles overlooks a third group which isn't overwhelmed by *Star Wars* in his column in the November issue: the people who won't settle for second best.

Certainly the film is a quantum leap in technique, and in the art of depicting a complex otherworldly society which exists on its own terms (although even here there are gross simplifications — the politics are early Roman Empire, and strangely all those alien races don't seem to participate, leaving interstellar government to the Homo Sapiens), and many of the incidental details are brilliant. I'll always love the bar scene, the holographic chess, the 100 foot skeleton of the sand monster *which everyone takes for granted,* but at the same time I have to regard the film as an overwhelmingly good treatment of a very weak script. Face it, *Star Wars* substitutes action for plot, and the action isn't at all convincing. Even on first viewing I found myself not at all involved with the fates of the characters once it had been clearly established that the bad guys are straw men. Darth Vader is about as fearsome as an overworked air-conditioner (which is what he sounds like), and the Imperial Stormtroopers can't hit the side of an asteroid with their rayguns.

Sure, the movie is juvenile, but it's not on the level of a good juvenile, which attempts to convey to the adolescent or pre-adolescent audience something of the wisdom of adulthood. *Star Wars* at no point even suggests that great deeds must be accomplished at a price, and with suffering. Luke Skywalker, dimwit that he is, may learn how to fight, but he doesn't mature at all. The only interesting character, Obi Wan Kenobi, turns into a stock Gandalf type, predictably sacrifices himself (a deliberate sacrifice, again no demonstration that the enemy is really *dangerous*) and is transmogrified onto the soundtrack to help pull off an equally unbelievable ending which looks like a remake of *Dawn Patrol* — this is hardly my idea of good drama. The movie fails the primary test I put to all SF films — if it were written as a story, without any movie tie-ins, would it be good enough to publish? For *Star Wars* the answer is almost certainly no, and if it were published by itself, it certainly wouldn't attract any attention. As a film it's a wonder to look at, but for actual content it's a long step backwards from *Forbidden Planet.*

I'm not one of the evil academic types with no sense of wonder that Baird talks about. I like space opera, if it's well done, convincing, and the author isn't visibly pulling strings. *Star Wars* is probably no flimsier than Doc Smith, but it can't hold a candle to the best of Edmond Hamilton, or Leigh Brackett, or Keith Laumer, not to mention someone like Marion Zimmer Bradley. Imagine what might have happened if Lucas had filmed a Darkover novel? Or, for that matter, *The Star Kings?*

— Darrell Schweitzer

Baird Searles replies:

I tried to make the point in the *Star Wars* column that the plot is, indeed "juvenile," but that the other creative elements of the film more than balanced that out. For years I've been saying that films cannot be judged solely or even primarily from a literary

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standard, which is what so many science fiction readers tend to do. But I'm glad Mr. Schweitzer mentioned the skeleton of the sand monster; it's one of those creative visual concepts that made the film so richly textured.

Darth Vader Lives?

Dear Mr. Searles:

I read with interest your column in F&SF regarding *Star Wars*. I too have burbled after seeing *Star Wars*, but that is not the subject of this letter. During the four months that *Star Wars* has been out, I've encountered the following related phenomenon:

SF "Revival" — Time magazine claims that its huge (financial) success has sparked a revival of SF films in Hollywood. Remakes of "When Worlds Collide" and "The Incredible Shrinking Man" are planned. WWC was a nice George Pal film — why bother again? The ISM is a sensitive little masterpiece needing no remake. Also, George Pal is planning a sequel to the "Time Machine" (his version or Wells'?).

Oh, and what happened to the universe of SF that lies untouched (perhaps for the best!) by Hollywood? It's really a miracle that Lucas' efforts were left alone instead of assigning some idiot like Irwin Allen to direct!

Nitpicking — (e.g. human instead of computer gunners in ships travelling at near light speeds). This phenomenon is an outgrowth of what I call The Groan Effect. Occasionally I have to endure a Space 1999 or a similar disaster which causes me to emit no fewer than 200 scalding criticisms during the course of one of these stories. GROAN!! I suspect nitpicking is an automatic reaction caused by constant exposure to poor shows.

Cultism — I confess I am guilty of this sin (it never happened with Star Trek fortunately!). My son now has two shirts, a lunchbox, two posters, cards and various magazines. However I'll never go around declaring "Darth Vader lives!"

Appeal — Perhaps the best indicator of the appeal of *Star Wars* is the fact that my seven year old son understood it — all of it! Plain old Good vs. Evil stuff.

In recent years I wondered if a good SF movie would ever come along that would introduce my son to the field. "Forbidden Planet" hasn't been on TV in years. He now has the burbles. Thanks George!

I wasn't going to mention burbles but you know how it is. My spaceport bar scene is the space battles; especially the opening scene. Having read many an Anderson story (the master of space battles — sorry, Doc Smith's stuff is not as good) I would reflect that no one is ever going to bring that one to the screen.

But George Lucas did it!

—Bill Paladini

Trek Fans vs. Wars Fans

I liked Baird Searles' comments on *Star Wars* and agree with both his enthusiasm for the movie and his worry that it may simply offer a fresh cult-object to replace or augment the cult surrounding *Star Trek*. I'd like to offer a correction to one of his statements, however:

"Some disillusioned science fiction person (could it have been Terry Carr?) said that 'the golden age of science fiction is twelve.'"

I didn't say this, though I've quoted the remark a few times, such as in my Introduction to *Universe 3*. Actually it was said back in 1960 by Peter Graham. A lot of people besides me

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have quoted it, including one person who said in print that L. Sprague de Camp originally said it! Since the comment contains a measure of truth as well as wit, I'd like to see credit go to Peter Graham to whom it's due.

In any case, I disavow the notion that I'm "disillusioned" with science fiction. In truth, I love sf, else I wouldn't continue to be so involved in it.

And Baird needn't be quite so worried about the *Star Wars* rage: It's an improvement over that for *Star Trek.* Sherry Gottlieb, the owner of science fiction's most successful bookstore *A Change of Hobbit* in Los Angeles, tells me that when *Star Trek* fans come into her store, they buy nothing but *Star Trek* items, whereas the *Star Wars* fans go on to buy science fiction books unconnected with the movie. The movie, therefore, seems to be attracting a host of new readers to sf, and for this we can surely be thankful.

—Terry Carr

On Hilbert Schenck's "Three Days..."

I have just finished the September issue — an outstanding one. I found the shorts a little weak, by your usual standards, but satisfactory. Then I moved on to Searles and Budrys and congratulated them on being so astute as to agree with me completely. Finally, I moved to the longer works. I read Phyllis Eisenstein first because of pleased remembrance of Alaric. I was disappointed that he did not destroy that villain, but then I am more bloodthirsty than she. Next I read Jennings because the title was attractive. I hope my sixteen year old son understands about half of it without translations by old Dad.

I put off Hilbert Schenck's story, and was tempted not to read it at all, because I am so tired of depressing stories of the end of human civilization. In the end, I found some clichés in the psychology and some doubtful points in the actions of the "spooks." I cannot really believe they would have backed down in the parking lot. Indeed, I sincerely doubt that any member of ship's crew or scientific staff would ever have got off the dock without being taken in for interrogation. But, with those cavils aside, I found this one of the most moving stories I have read in some time. The man and his students and the Captain who understood her job and the uselessness of an oceanographic cruise which does not serve the needs of the scientists above all else were beautifully drawn. The love story was true and right. And the indictment of governments, industries, armies, and scientists who are willing to continue producing substances whose destructive properties are only partly understood and for which they know no antidote is vivid and incisive. This was, indeed, another depressing story of the end of the world. But Professor Schenck's world is *not* Elliot's. The menace in the Atlantic may make no great bang, but neither will Bernie and Olga go out with a whimper. They will remain human, and if they do die, they will die fighting for their life and for the life of the world. And that is the essence of humanity.

My thanks to you and to Professor Schenck.

—James Mead

Hilbert Schenck's novelette "Three Days at the End of the World" is a fine work, tight, with the ending controlled and poetic. It is not like the older pulps, in which the hero can't find personal happiness, where he must leave

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(*from page 160*)

his woman and rush out to save the world. In this story, he finds love and individual happiness while the world falls apart. This expresses certainly the prevailing individualism of the 70's and its science fiction, combining social cynicism with personal hope. Women and sex are not merely thrown in as a "romantic interest angle," but serve as counterpoint and always needed balance to the "greater" plot. Sex and dope do seem sometimes to be obligatory injections, the surface accoutrements of the 70's, yet it's nonetheless interesting stuff for a scientist-dreamer. Ask him to get better titles, and ask him for more.

—Robert Howe

We have a new story from Hilbert Schenck on hand. Its title is "The Morphology of the Kirkham Wreck," and it is a fascinating tale of time travel and adventure at sea off the coast of Nantucket. Coming up soon.

F&SF's Oldest Reader?

Your September number of Fantasy and Science Fiction arrived yesterday, and I'm delighted with the beautiful slick cover. And Don Dixon is to be congratulated for the fine painting.

No doubt you have readers of all ages. I am approaching 82, but I suspect that even that age would not qualify me as your oldest reader. Thanks for a fine magazine.

—Gertrude Toll

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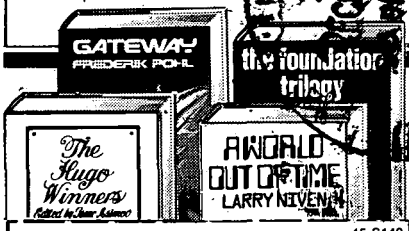

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